

THE DRACULA HORROR SERIES #4

523-00256-095★95¢

Dracula's Gold

A spine-tingling treasure hunt through the
wolf-haunted tunnels of Dracula Mountain!

by Robert Lory



"BLOOD?" ASKED THE WOMAN IN WHITE.

"Ah, yes. In a manner of speaking, my blood does run cold. I shall have to warm it, won't I?"

She began the descent of the stairs, taking one at a time, steadily advancing closer to them. Ilona wanted to scream, but somehow couldn't—just as she found she couldn't run.

God! The face of that other woman—it looked as if *she* might be a snake! Her teeth now looked as if—

But that could not be!

"Stay back," Stelian warned. "I do not consider striking a woman to be honorable, but if you—"

"Strike me?" the woman laughed. She had reached the bottom of the stairs and was no more than twenty feet from him and the girl. "Strike me? Your hands would not have the opportunity, young man. No, they will be very busy—protecting your throat. Do you believe that? Do you?"

As she kept coming, Stelian prepared a defiant answer. He had no chance to deliver it. What she said came to pass.

Her hands were on his throat. He tried to scream, but could not.

Ilona, on her part, did manage to scream.

But it did her no good.

DRACULA'S GOLD

by
Robert Lory

PINNACLE BOOKS • NEW YORK CITY

DRACULA'S GOLD

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A Pinnacle Books original, published for the first time anywhere.

First printing, November 1973

Printed in the United States of America

PINNACLE BOOKS, INC.

275 Madison Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10016

Other books in the Dracula Series:

DRACULA RETURNS

THE HAND OF DRACULA

DRACULA'S BROTHERS

DRACULA'S GOLD

PROLOGUE

The four bearers of the chests of gold stopped before the temple entrance, they now seeing that She Who Was Both Cat And Woman was angry with them.

And she, looking but fleetingly at the chests much as the already-nourished bird looks at a too-slender worm, set her green eyes upon the young man who was named Tampa.

And she asked him why he had stolen from her Lord.

And Tampa's body began shaking with violence, as he delivered unto her coins which, unknown to the other three, he had taken from one of the chests and placed within his garments.

And the High Priestess admonished him wrathfully and said unto him to take himself swiftly from the place, never again to show his face in the vicinity.

And he did as he was commanded and was seen no more.

But Kula, who was the eldest of the three remaining bearers and who was father to Tampa, beat his breast before the Priestess and said unto her: Why does the Dragon's Son demand so much from us that he cannot spare a handful of coins?

And she said sternly: The Master needs all the gold which can be gathered because that day will come when only gold will save this world.

Then she smiled upon Kula and said: You are not at fault, old man, and shall not be held in blame for your son's act. For your sake I have spared your thieving child's life. But be sure of this which I next say. He who from hereon attempts to steal the gold which is tribute to the Son of the Dragon will die a horrible death like unto no other within the imagination of man.

from the Tibetan *Genealogy of the Dragon*
Second Century B.C.

CHAPTER 1

Originally, there had been three couples who, that Sunday in January, had gone from the village of Arefu up the pathway to the top of the mountain. It had been a beautiful afternoon, the temperature still brisk but with very little wind to chill its way through the thick clothing the six young people wore. There, under the normally foreboding ruins of the stone castle, they had picnicked and enjoyed their food and beer and the view of the valley below.

It had not snowed in the area for almost a full week, but from this height the rooftops of the village and the larger town of Pitesti which lay beyond it still glistened with clean snow, as did the hills and hillocks which lay on the other side of the Arges, the fast-moving river filled with its gleaming water of ice which from here wended its way southeast to flow into the storied Danube and thus mingle its mountain-born waters with the river which formed a good three quarters of the border between Romania and Bulgaria.

Perhaps it was the steady flowing of the droplets of the Arges to points far beyond which occupied the thoughts of the young man named Stelian. He had been quiet for some time now, seated on a low flat rock and staring to the south. He was not of this immediate area, but had come here from Valea Mare to the east. It was the castle ruins

which had brought him here—the ruins and the work that he had heard was being offered to good strong arms and backs.

Stelian had strong arms and back. He also had a ruggedly handsome face to which the Arefu girls were strongly attracted. The girl who sat quietly beside him had been very strongly attracted. Her name was Ilona, but right now Ilona was becoming increasingly frightened.

She had not liked the idea when their companions had decided to go back to the village. The sun was just about to sink from sight beyond the western hills. But Stelian had said no. There was more beer, and the view here was so much better—cleaner—than that of the inside of some smoky tavern. “Besides, my Ilona, here we can be alone. And I wish for us to be alone.”

This was her wish as well, but after the others had gone and after the blood-red rays of the sun began to proclaim its last vestiges from behind the hills, she became anxious.

“I do not understand,” she told him. “You are up here every workday for the past week and a half. Why should you want to stay here now?”

“Do you not like me, Ilona?” was his response.

“Of—of course I like you, Stelian. I would not have accompanied you today had I not liked—”

“But I mean *like* in a more special way. Something more than the way one friend would *like* another. Do you comprehend my meaning?”

“Yes, but—”

“And so I ask you again, my fair-haired Ilona: Do you *like* me—in the way of my meaning?”

Quietly she answered, “Yes.”

“That pleases me,” he said. “Shall we build a small fire? I would think it will get cold here very fast now that the sun—”

"No! No fire. We must go, Stelian. We dare not stay here any longer!"

She rose from her seat. He remained where he was except for his hand. His fingers' grasp on her wrist was gentle but firm.

"You are hurting me," she complained.

"That is not true." But he released her. "Why, dear Ilona, should we not remain here for a little time?"

"The way down is difficult in the dark."

He nodded. "But no more difficult than it is by day. And look there—we are to have a very silvery moon to light our way."

She followed his eyes. It was so.

"Perhaps, Ilona, you are but making excuses, to put off an experience which you expect to find distasteful."

She shook her head. "No, Stelian. It is just that you do not understand. You—"

"I do not understand what? Women? Is it women I do not understand?" He smiled and reached for her hand again. When his fingers touched hers, he looked at her strangely. Her hand was like ice.

Again she shook her head. "No, that is not what I mean. What I mean is that you do not understand this place or anything about it. This mountain, those ruins up on the hill. You are not from here, Stelian. You do not know—"

He laughed. "I know more than you give me credit for, girl. Although I am not from your village, you forget that I work side by side with men who are. They have spoken often—all too often, in my opinion—of the legends of this place. The Mountain of Dracula. The Castle of Dracula. I have heard it all, as why should I not? How could there be any secret at all about these things—with this Mr. Conescu himself being who he is?"

"Then—then, if you *know*, why do you insist—"

"What I *know* is what I have heard, Ilona. I know that certain old stories exist, stories which began before this present century. I have no knowledge as to the truth of such stories. *Vampires!*"

The girl jumped at the word. Her voice trembled:

"Y-you should not s-scoff. What was *that?*"

The young man laughed again. "It was a wolf howling, Ilona. Just a wolf." He pulled her to him and held her, an act full of tenderness. "Hear—there is our wolf again."

The long-held cry of the wolf was unmistakable. It was a mournful wail which, even as it descended in pitch and volume, cut the otherwise silent air of the night like a saber blade. An ice-cold saber blade.

"Wolves can be dangerous," the girl said quickly.

"But they are known to fear fire, are they not? Yes. That is why I have suggested we build one—a large one, if you like."

"Cannot we just go?" The voice held a measure of pleading.

"I choose to stay. There still are three bottles of beer more to drink, and I wish to drink them here. I would like to have you here with me, Ilona, but if it is your wish to go down to the village without me—"

"*No!* Please, do not send me down by myself!"

He gathered the girl to him more tightly. "Send you? My darling, I swear I would not do it—not ever! I want you here with me, don't you understand that?"

Her trembling now was not a matter just of voice but of her whole body.

"Yes, yes, Stelian, I do. I—I *do*. But do you not understand that I am afraid? Frightened for my very life—and yours?"

Softly he answered. "I begin to, Ilona, but there is nothing to fear. I told you that I have heard the legends of this place, have I not?"

“Yes.”

In contrast to her weak reply, another wolf cry pierced through the night with an edge of fierceness.

“Did you hear that, Ilona? The wolf? You did, I know, because your whole frame shook when it sounded. Well then, hearing it should make you feel better. Hearing the cry of the wolf should tell you that we are in no possible danger.”

She looked at him closely. “I do not understand.”

“The wolves—or wolf, if in fact there is just one. But that would hardly be the case. Wolves do run in packs, do they not? They do. In any case, does not the legend of this place hold that when the vampire is here, the wolves will not draw close? Is that not the story?”

“It is *one* of the stories, yes.”

“Then there you are,” he said matter-of-factly. “The wolves *are* here.”

“Were you told the complete story, I wonder?” she said. She was a bit calmer now, but her voice still shook. “About how, from the beginning of this century, no wolves at all would come near Dracula Mountain, how it was said that *he* was buried somewhere near those castle ruins and that the wolves, from generation to generation, somehow passed on the knowledge that this monster who lay hidden could rule them, make them do his every bidding. For that reason has this mountain been without the howls and tracks of the wolf.”

“But they are here now, are they not?”

“They are,” she answered as if in a trance. “They are. It is strange but true. After all these decades, after almost eighty years, they have returned to the mountain. Four or five months ago they came, as if the evil which had cursed this place somehow had been removed.”

Stelian laughed. “Exactly my point, my sweet girl. If

ever there was an evil which cursed this mountain, it is gone."

"Gone," she repeated. "With perhaps another evil having taken its place."

"By which you mean Mr. Conescu and his niece. Just because he is a descendant of the Count—one widely separated from the Count's place on the family tree—is no reason to think him evil. There is nothing in the legends about vampirism running in families."

"But there *is*, Stelian! Often the vampire attacks his loved ones as his very first victims! That is an historical truth, because it is part of the vampire's curse, part of the poison in his Devil-held soul, which perverts his love into a deadly hate. I can tell you many tales in which—"

He put an index finger across her lips to seal them. "And I, my little darling, can tell you many tales in which men who, disgusted with their wives, have slain them brutally and thereafter have been called vampires. Some were madmen, driven no doubt to that state by their women's incessant chattering. I too have heard all of the old stories, Ilona, but in this present place and time all I shall say for Mr. Conescu's niece is that she is a lovely woman—a bit too advanced in years and too thin for one like myself, and perhaps a bit strange in her behavior. As for the man himself, he is a hard task-master, but he has a right to be, in that he pays an excellent wage."

"To dig, to have you men dig into the hillside. Why, Stelian, why does he wish this work done?"

"Something about finding evidence to clear his family's name—I know nothing more and I care to know nothing more."

Again a wolf howled in the night, followed by a second.

"They sound closer," the girl said. "Please, Stelian, can we—"

He sighed, then rose from the rock. "All right, my

little one. There shall be no mountainside fire and there shall be none of the romance which had been my wish. Not for tonight. Instead there shall be the fire of a crowded tavern—if, that is, you intend to spend the evening with me. You do not, I take it, have another assignation you wish to rush to?"

The girl giggled with pleasure. She could, now that he had promised they would be leaving this place.

"There is no other, and you well know it, good Stelian. I will do my best to prove that to you once we—Stelian! Why do you start *up* the hill?"

He held up the bottles of beer. "There is all the beer I'll need in the tavern below. These three bottles I shall leave for a repast tomorrow. The work is sometimes hot, and these shall serve me nicely."

"Then leave them here, right here," she urged.

He shook his head. "No. If it should snow just a little, or if the wind should rise and move the snow on the ground about, they would be lost to me. Even if I tried to orient myself by rocks, I should have some difficulty recovering them—and then, of course, my fellow workers would see me fish out my treasure, and you can guess just how much of the beer in each bottle would be Stelian's lot. But up there, among the crusty ruins where hiding is simpler, there will I bury my riches."

Turning, he walked with resolution upward toward the ruins. She had no recourse but to follow him which she did at a run. The going was not all that easy, in that the incline was at times almost forty degrees, and yet Stelian moved with the sureness of foot of a mountain goat. Perhaps that is what he really is, Ilona mused, stopping to watch her young man from Valea Mare. She did not stop long. Another howling wolf hurried her steps.

Stelian was already past the line of high, jutting spires of natural stone which, on the eastward side of the

mountain, seemed to act as the uprights of huge barriers the gods of long ago had placed there to seal off the lowlands from whatever unholy thing they had trapped on the top of the mountain itself. As she too passed between two of the stone towers, she looked upward toward that mountain top. And she felt a sense of that primeval horror.

Castle Dracula.

The moon shone down upon the immense pile of stone on stone, highlighting with pale silvery ribbons the irregular crags that were the result of fire and earthquake and the ceaseless ravages of time itself. Unworldly did the edifice look, standing upright as a monument to itself against the sickly illuminated snowscape around it, a snowscape dotted with the tracks of the many men who toiled on the hillside—tracks which now, helped by the angle of the moonlight looked like nothing so much as armies of gigantic bugs swarming around a stone altar whose meaning was lost to the ages but known to them alone. An altar, a monument, was Castle Dracula, which had withstood the ever-battering onslaughts of man and nature and yet still defiantly clutched with its mangled roots the crest of the mountain. Never before had Ilona dared to come so close to this ancient pile of stone. Never at night had anyone done so. For it felt—it *was*—

A place of the dead.

"Stelian!"

At her cry, he turned toward her. Some ten yards further up the hill, it seemed to her that he already had stopped his forward progress, but she did not care about that. She only wanted his eyes on her, his arms around her. Running, stumbling in the snow which now seemed colder than it had earlier, she reached his side. And his arms.

"Please, Stelian. . . ."

"In a moment, my love. Just a moment. All we have is another fifty yards or so and then—"

"I'm cold, Stelian, so very cold. . . ."

"That too I will take care of—at the proper time." He laughed cheerfully. "Come, let us tramp within the stones which once were gracious walls. *Come, I say.*"

He had tried to pull her gently, but her feet seemed as rooted into the ground upon which she stood. Thus his sharply edged voice and the more urgent physical shove from his hands.

Doom, she thought. He's taking us to our doom. As foot followed foot, as he half-dragged her upward and closer to the stones of the castle, her mind raced frantically. *Dear God, he's going to kill us both!*

And then they were there. Moving inside a great gash in what had been the exterior wall of the building, they were inside, their feet still in snow, but snow which covered what once had been the polished stone floor of one of the receiving rooms of the castle. Or the library or dining hall. But what did it matter? They now were where *he* had held sway, where the very demon of Hell himself had lived—and killed. And worse. . . .

As Stelian left her side to accomplish the work which had brought him to this place, her eyes roamed the interior of the craggy walls. The moon did such strange things to the walls, to those old stone steps which still led to what was left of the battlements, to—

The moon.

"Stelian! The moon—it is *full!*"

The young man was now back at her side. "The full moon is also associated with love, Ilona. Not solely the fearful emotions, but those of good."

"Not in this—this place!" she said, her eyes not looking at him, but still transfixed beyond him. "Not—*oh, my God!*"

Stelian followed her eyes to a place on the stairwell where the moonlight bathed the rock. But it was not the rock which drew his focus, for something other than stone was bathed in the pale beams of the moon.

"Why have you come here?" the woman said.

She was as something not of this world, and this quality caused the mouths and eyes of the two young lovers to open wide and their bones to lock chillingly into place. As if it were summer and not the dead of winter, she wore nothing but a light gown of white, a white which shimmered in the moonlight as would the bones of a cleanly-picked skeleton. Yet her voice had the edge of the icy season, an edge of cold hate, pure venom but mixed with a disdain which carried with it little in the way of concern. And her eyes and mouth, by their cold turns, conveyed the same.

Stelian found his voice first. Both he and Ilona had recognized the thin-framed woman; both he and Ilona had reacted with involuntary paralysis approaching physical shock, but it was he who spoke first, his words echoing strangely, hollowly in his own ears.

"Miss Conescu, why have *you* come here? The night grows cold, and you are hardly dressed for it. Perhaps you will take my coat and come with us back to the village where I am sure your uncle, if he knew where you were, would be worried sick about—"

Her laugh cut him off. It was a laugh of derision, of superiority.

"My uncle? You dare to presume as to what thoughts my uncle harbors within his skull? His real thoughts would surprise you, stupid fool. As would mine." She pointed a long finger at them both. "I have asked you a questions, dolts! Attempt to answer me as intelligently as you can. Why have you come here?"

Ilona's mind was in a turmoil. Beer! That's all it was, just three insignificant bottles of beer. Stelian called them riches, his treasure—

"Treasure," she said.

And ice gripped her heart as she did.

"Treasure," the woman on the timeworn stairs repeated. "Treasure. You think you have the wits to discover it? Do you?"

The young man frowned. "Look, Miss Conescu, if you'll let me explain—perhaps on the way down to the village—"

The woman in white smiled. "But we are not going down to the village. No, not *we*. I shall be going to join my uncle, but that will be later, *after* I dispose of you and your lady friend."

Stelian looked at her with hard eyes, his muscles tightening. "Dispose?"

"You have heard me correctly, you insipid fool! You, both of you, will not leave this place alive. Perhaps it will serve as a warning to others, perhaps not. I am philosophical about that, because I do not care how many bodies of the dead result from the stupidity of the living."

Stelian pushed Ilona toward the gash in the rock which they'd used for an entrance. "Move!" he commanded.

"Do *not* move," commanded the woman on the stairwell.

Catching her balance, Ilona stood still, her eyes on the eyes of the other—eyes which seemed to possess a wild blaze, a fiery insanity, which grasped her own.

And then the woman opened her mouth wide, pushing back her lips so that her teeth could be seen. There was nothing unusual about her teeth, even though the thinness of her body seemed to make them look large in proportion, even though her lips moving back seemed to make them look as if they were . . . growing?

"No!" Stelian roared. "You try to scare us, to frighten us—is that it? But you do not succeed, Miss, you do not. Because I am not from this place, because I do not share with the villagers below their fear of this mountain and the so-called vampires who supposedly once dwelt here—because I know you are nothing more than a woman, and an insane woman at that. To come all the way from the village dressed as you are—what sane person would do that? Knowing full well that the blood runs cold—"

"Blood?" asked the woman in white. "Ah, yes. In a manner of speaking, my blood does run cold. I shall have to warm it, won't I?"

She began her descent of the stairs, taking one at a time, steadily advancing closer to them. Ilona wanted to scream, but somehow couldn't—just as she found she couldn't run. Why, she did not know, but she never had been brave in the face of danger. Even as a child, when confronted with a snake—

God! The face of that other woman—it looked as if *she* might be a snake! Her teeth now looked as if—

But that could not be! Just because she had been thinking of the unholy Count who had . . .

"Stay back," Stelian warned. "I do not consider striking a woman to be honorable, but if you—"

"Strike me?" the woman laughed. She had reached the bottom of the stairs and was no more than twenty feet from him and the girl. "Strike me? Your hands would not have the opportunity, young man. No, they will be very busy—protecting your throat. Do you believe that? Do you?"

As she kept coming, Stelian prepared a defiant answer. He had no chance to deliver it. What she said came to pass.

His hands were on his throat.

He tried to scream, but could not.

Ilona, on her part, did manage to scream. But it did her no good.

CHAPTER 2

“Working late, Dr. Thorka?”

Dr. Alexandru Thorka looked up from his paper-covered desk toward the open door of his office. He was a squarely built man somewhere in his mid-seventies, his age being something his colleagues at the University of Bucharest rarely thought about. A master of many subjects, his current specialty was archaeology, and, many times over, men whose credentials claimed for them expertise in the field had learned not to challenge a Thorka opinion. “I am too old to compete in games,” he was fond of saying, but when a certain sparkle came into his gray eyes and the mouth surrounded by the thick salt-and-pepper beard curved into an impish smile, the scholarly contest, the academic game of semantic and split-hair brickbats, was on. Depending upon Dr. Thorka’s estimation of and feeling toward his opponent, the defeat of that opponent ranged from a mild rebuke of evidence all the way to utter devastation taking the form of an avalanche of facts and figures.

Dr. Alexandru Thorka was an expert, one who gained his expertise through the combination of an almost perfect photographic memory, a mental storehouse of widely diffuse bits of data cross-referenced so that no small item of information which might conceivably apply to a given question was ever overlooked, and an insatiable curiosity

about anything he did not completely understand. Although how others regarded himself or his expertise did not especially matter to this man who was "too old to compete," one clear testimony of the University administration's regard for him was the office in which he now labored. Sparsely furnished, according to the Doctor's taste, it nonetheless was one of the largest to be found within the University grounds. No department head had an office close to the size of Dr. Thorka's, who not only did not teach classes but who seemed accountable to no one in authority. He considered himself to be "loosely attached" to the institution, and it appeared that those who ran it were happy enough just being able to bask in the reflected prestige such an arrangement afforded.

"Well, do not simply stand there, Matei. Come in, please," the old man said to the assistant professor of classical studies who still stood in the open doorway.

"I did not mean to disturb you, Dr. Thorka," the younger man said. "It was just that it is so late. I saw the light and wanted to be sure—"

Thorka laughed. "You wanted to be sure that the old bear had not suffered a heart attack while shuffling through his papers. I quite understand, Matei, but as you can see the ancient heart still pumps the vital fluids to the areas of my frail frame which require them. But come in anyway. I have some excellent cognac which might serve to warm said fluids and frame."

The younger man smiled at the Doctor's use of the word *frail*. Far more appropriate the word would be to describe Matei himself. But the suggestion regarding the cognac was a welcome one. Mattei had been working somewhat hard this night, and his bones would welcome the additional warmth. Also, he knew Alexandru Thorka's tastes in food and beverage to be highly cultivated.

Accepting the chair beside the large desk, Matei's

eyes scanned the desktop as Thorka located the cognac and glasses in the credenza behind his swivel chair. One item which especially caught the younger man's eye was a newspaper clipping, only the headline of which could he read from that distance and angle. He was about to comment on it when Thorka extended a glass to him.

"And what is it which keeps you in your office so late, Matei—away from your young wife and two, or is it three, darling children?"

"Three, Dr. Thorka," Matei replied, surprised that the old man would have any personal interest in or knowledge of his family situation. The two men had never had much to say to one another. But it was said that Alexandru Thorka watched all the younger men at the University, and knowing that, the administration often asked his opinion as to who might best fill an opening when one occurred on a higher level. Had the old man been watching him?

He sipped the cognac. It was excellent, as Thorka had promised. "Term theses, Dr. Thorka. That is what has kept me from my family this evening."

"Ah yes," Thorka said sympathetically. "I have almost forgotten that occupational hazard of the educator, the required reading of thousands upon thousands of student words and only now and then coming upon one really solid *thought*. It is enough to make one wish one had taken up some other line of work, is it not?"

Matei agreed. "This year especially. I think I have detected what may be the beginning of a new trend in student writing, although I hope to whatever gods there be that I am wrong."

Thorka's eyebrows rose with interest. "A new trend? Something moving away from the usual sophomoric verbosity?"

"Unfortunately, no. One might take the position that

what has always been the level of verbosity could not be surpassed—that we had reached, so to speak, a saturation point. But such is not the case. The good students of our University, at least those studying the classics, have made what may be a veritable breakthrough. The technique is so simply grasped that what surprises me is that we've not seen it in such wholesale fashion prior to this. It consists of taking the current level of wordy expression and translating it back into the classic modes of writing. It was bad enough reading a sophomoric explanation of what is a rather simple story of Homer, but now we are finding the explanation of the simple story written the way Homer might have written it if he were suddenly immersed in our educational system."

Thorka refilled Matei's glass. "Let us drink to the hope that what you have uncovered may be just a passing fad. Here—no reason to strain your eyes."

Matei took the newspaper clipping from the old man, his face flushing. "I'm sorry. If it's something you'd rather not—"

Thorka shook his head. "No secret. Fully in the public domain, Matei. Besides, I'm interested in your reaction."

TWO FOUND DEAD ON MOUNTAIN; THROATS SLASHED HORRIBLY

Matei had been able to read the headline before, but now he read the entire story—what there was of it. Seven short paragraphs contained it all. A young woman from the village of Arefu and a young man from Valea Mare had remained behind on what was called Dracula Mountain after the other couples with whom they had been picnicking had left. The next morning their mangled bodies were found near the ruins of the castle at the mountain crest by workers laboring for Mr. Radu Conescu. Their throats were ripped open and it appeared

they had lost a great quantity of blood. The newspaper, published in nearby Pitesti, claimed that the Arefu villagers were speaking of the event as having to do with the vampire legends associated with the mountain.

"My reaction?" Matei asked. "In what regard, Dr. Thorka?"

"The cause of death. What comes to mind?"

Matei reread two of the paragraphs thoughtfully. "Perhaps . . . and this is of course without seeing the actual bodies—"

"Now it is you who are being verbose, Matei."

"Yes, well, I suppose so. Well, it could be a very simple case of murder. A jealous boy friend, perhaps. The newspaper says that the young man who was killed was not a local. Perhaps the girl had taken up with him and, doing so, left a smoldering villager whose love, unrequited, caused him to—"

Thorka held up a hand. "That is a possible explanation. Do you have another?"

"Well, there is . . . well, this vampire possibility. I emphasize the word *possibility*. If one were weighing *probabilities*—"

"If one were doing that, Matei, one would have to take into account the history of the mountain and the castle. You are familiar with them, I assume?"

"Of course. But what you call a history is but a collection of stories, local folklore, which—"

"Which, in other contexts, has led people in my profession to a host of discoveries. Homer, whom you mentioned a little while ago, was viewed as nothing but a collector of folktales. Yet it was mainly his reading of Homer—and accepting the stories as factual accounts—which led Heinrich Schliemann to uncover the supposedly legendary but very real city of Troy."

"I do not deny that, in some isolated cases—"

"Isolated? Hardly. More and more, archaeologists are taking these so-called stories very seriously. And the proof, dear Matei, lies in the results of this attitude. The results have been fruitful and legion."

Matei waved the newspaper clipping. "But surely, Dr. Thorka, *vampires!*"

Thorka spoke softly, but there was authority in his voice:

"Vampires, Matei. These beings are not the subject of just our folk legends, you know. They appear in the folklore and literature—classic literature—of almost every people in every time and place. They go by different names, to be sure, and the accounts differ as to exact points in their behavior patterns, but they are there. Much as the Great Flood is an event in the dawn-of-history literature of widely scattered peoples, so too are the stories of the bloodsucking undead, the unholy being which is viewed with awe and terror and which sometimes has even been elevated to the status of a god, albeit always a god of the dark and evil. No, Matei. The vampire appears in too many places, in too many times, for him to be dismissed as nothing but the creation of a fertile imagination."

"I concede, Doctor. I am not totally unaware of these things you mention. But you seem to have researched into this subject most thoroughly. Might I ask why?"

The lines of Thorka's face relaxed. "Call it simple curiosity. During the past few months, I have had reason to have my interest stimulated."

Matei again examined the news clipping. "This Conescu—he for one does not seem to share the fear of the villagers for the mountain of Arefu. Nor, for that matter, do those who work for him."

Thorka smiled. "The workers? They fear, all right, but they are swayed by the wages their employer pays—and

also they do not work by night. As for Radu Conescu, he perhaps does not fear. He is, he says, related to the last owner of Castle Dracula by blood."

Thorka's manner of speaking his last word brought a half-smile to Matei's lips. "You are thinking, then, that perhaps this member of the Count's family might be in fact a vampire?"

The older man did not respond all at once. When he did it was noncommittal. "I am not absolutely discounting that possibility," he said. "What he has told our government people is that he is excavating to determine something of the truth concerning the Count. He claims that Count Dracula has been much maligned and that he hopes to set the record straight."

"He has told. He claims," Matei repeated. "You use these words as if you are skeptical."

"Is there anything wrong about having a healthy skepticism, Matei?"

"No, but—I take it all of these papers on your desk have to do with the castle and Radu Conescu?"

"You take it correctly."

"Your interest is indeed deep, I must say, Doctor. But, if it is not presumptuous of me, may I ask a question? Why have you translated so much of this material into English?"

"I have a friend whose knowledge of our language may be a bit rusty, a friend who I think possibly—no, probably—will have an interest in these matters as deep as my own. Definitely, I think."

Matei still held the news clipping. As he replaced it on the desk, he nodded thoughtfully.

"There is a third possibility, Dr. Thorka. If my jealous lover is one and your vampire is the second, a third

might well be wolves. I take it there *are* wolves on this Mountain of Dracula?"

"Oh yes, Matei," Thorka said levelly. "There are wolves on Dracula Mountain. Yes. There are wolves there *now*."

CHAPTER 3

. . . and, dear Damien, still the wolves do howl from the mountain as you and I heard them first from that inn in Pitesti. But now there has appeared a new wolf, a man who claims to be of the same lineage as the legendary Count, a man who has begun extensive excavation into the mountainside below the castle. At the request of the Archaeological Institute here in Bucharest and at the request of other interested governmental bodies, I have met with and talked to this Radu Conescu. While his papers are still being checked by the proper authorities, permission to excavate has been granted. You may know that the Institute as well as the University long have wished to uncover more of the history which might be revealed by such a dig, but that as always it has been a matter of securing the necessary funds.

Funds, however, do not seem to be a problem to this Conescu whose wages have attracted even the most superstitious villagers to enter his employ. But in speaking with the man, I have come away with the impression that he is not exactly what he claims to be. Perhaps something more, perhaps something less. I am not all that competent in matters of this type of investigation, nor do I have the entree to circles which might be of effective assistance.

In the event, then, that you are interested in the

matters which the attached documents relate, you may find one in particular to be of value. It is the one enclosed in acetate, so that the fingerprints of Radu Conescu might be preserved for further examination. If I were to hazard a guess, it would be that the man is Russian or German, and if a choice had to be made between the two I would say Russian.

Thinking ahead a bit, if these things are of such an interest to you that you might contemplate coming to Romania, I think arrangements can be made for you and your associates—and whatever baggage, large or small, you deem necessary—to enter and depart our country with less cumbersome methods than those of your last visit.

Of course, you may not have the slightest interest in any of this. If I do not hear from you on the subject, I shall assume such is the case. In any event, I remain,

Yours in long friendship,
Alexandru Thoraka

As he read the letter by the light of the fire from the great stone hearth Cameron Sanchez shook his head and grinned. The grin turned to a Latin cheerfulness what was otherwise a stolid face which seemed, in the firelight, to be carved from a flawless piece of ivory, flawless even to the top of his bullet-shaped head, which, except for dark brows which hovered over black Spanish-looking eyes, was totally without hair.

The two others in the large study, the man and the woman, were silent as he read the letter, the only sounds in the room being the roar of the fire, the wailing winds which swept the predicted abundance of snow whirling about and through the forest of tall pines which completely surrounded the thirty-five room Westhampton manor, and the monotonous crashing of the surf which tonight pounded severely against the southern Long Is-

land beach some fifty yards from the nearest wall.

Both of the others, the man and the woman, sat well away from the fire. The woman had an aversion to flame, not because of what it could do to her but because of what she could not do in its close proximity. She was dressed in black slacks and sweater, curled up in a wing-back chair much as an animal might curl—a cat especially. But it was a position of grace, for her at least—her entire body was graceful, as were her finely chiseled features surrounded by short-clipped jet black hair, as were her eyes, a soft pale green.

The man, in his early sixties but, despite the silver leonine mane which crested his head, looking ten to fifteen years younger, sat close to his desk and looked again through the attachments to his old Romanian friend's letter. His seat was a wheelchair, to him only a slight improvement over the one to which he was confined in the year 1938 when his lower spinal column was smashed by a hoodlum's lead pipe, a weapon which also was responsible for the metal plate which now cupped around the frontal lobes of his brain. And yet this man did not look like an invalid. His bull-like shoulders were almost as large as those of his younger assistant, Cameron Sanchez—but not quite. Sanchez, after all, stood six five, and a good deal of the steellike muscle that went into his two hundred and twenty pounds was packed into his shoulders and arms.

Professor Damien Harmon, possessor of doctorate degrees in ancient literature and medieval philosophy and a master's degree in physics all before he reached his mid-twenties, looked up from his desk as the younger man rose and crossed the room toward him. The professor's hawklike face nodded at the letter.

"Well?" he asked. He had read it shortly after it came in the afternoon mail. Cam Sanchez had just returned from

the village where he'd been stocking up on provisions, and it had been his first opportunity to read the letter. As for the woman, Ktara had not read the letter at all. Yet she knew what it said.

"Well?" Harmon repeated. "What do you think?"

Cam placed it on the professor's desk and returned to his place by the fire. "I think your old friend Thorka is a pretty smart old fox."

Harmon again nodded. "With which I won't take issue. But how do you mean it?"

"His letter says it all. His reference to our 'last visit.' He not only knows why we went to his country and to the mountain, but I'm willing to bet this house against a one-room flat in my old Spanish Harlem neighborhood that he knows what we left there with—and it's also fairly certain he did a little checking as to how we managed it." *

"Probably. Alex showed some concern that our acts, into which he did not pry, might have something political in their basis. If he did some checking, for which I certainly would not blame him, it had nothing to do with his not believing my assurances such was not the case. I would wager it was nothing more than curiosity as to our methodology."

He looked at the woman. "Do I win my wager, Ktara?"

The woman rose from the wingback in one long, fluid movement. At the edge of the desk, she placed her fingertips upon Alexandru Thorka's letter. Her eyes were closed for only an instant.

"Dr. Thorka," she said, "was motivated primarily by curiosity, yes. Not only concerning your actions, but as to the reality of what he suspects was taken from the mountain." Her voice was strange, foreign. Not foreign so much in the sense of a person from another country speaking

* See *DRACULA RETURNS!*, The Dracula Horror Series #1

English, in that her English was perfect. It was rather as if she were not used to speaking at all—not in the manner of human beings. It was as if human speech itself were a method of communication she found somewhat cumbersome.

Cam rubbed his jaw reflectively. “All right, so your old Romanian friend is motivated by nothing but the highest of scientific principles—the question is, what do you plan to do about it?”

Harmon considered. “At the very least, I’m going to have this document with the fingerprints checked out. Sandy Proctor can get it done through Interpol. I’m sure he’ll oblige me with a favor.”

Cam was just as sure. Sanford Proctor and Harmon had been friends ever since the year they both joined the New York City Police Department, the same year of Harmon’s crippling. Although in official retirement, Proctor still had a hand in the game, and off and on in the intervening years he and Harmon had exchanged small favors, neither man delving too deeply into what the other was concerned with. But very recently Proctor had come to the professor with a very real and urgent problem, one which had been solved to the ex-policeman’s thorough satisfaction.**

Ex-policeman. It was odd. All three of them—Proctor, Harmon and Cam himself—were ex-cops. Proctor retired with a pension and, no doubt, honors. Harmon had been discharged because, as a specialist in the then-new science of criminology, he was not supposed to enter into “the field” and had done so against orders. As for Cameron Sanchez, he too had been discharged. The heroin which had been planted in his squad car almost sent the rookie Puerto Rican cop to jail as well—would have, had not

** See *DRACULA’S BROTHERS*, *The Dracula Horror Series* #3

Damien Harmon entered the fray with his high-priced lawyers. A millionaire and a genius, Harmon had retired from his university teaching career at fifty, to devote himself to his two compelling interests: crime and the occult. His interest in Cam had to do with the former. The Puerto Rican was one of several consecutive assistants who had helped the professor in his clandestine fight against organized crime. In the three years—no, four now that it was the beginning of a new year—they had been together, they had done quite a bit. But Cam had one distinction none of his predecessors had attained. He was, he knew, the first of Harmon's aides ever to have gotten involved in that second interest of the professor's.

The occult.

Cam never had much to say about it, good or otherwise. He had been content to learn all he could from the technical section of Harmon's extensive library, especially that portion dealing with electronics. As to those books dealing with telepathy, lost languages, mythology and other esoteric subjects, Cam could not have been less interested. Not until that night it all began, after a visit from a woman in black, when Harmon read to him from a book the professor never had seen before. It was a book of rhymes, simply written of simple things. But the things were such as no ear had heard of for centuries upon centuries.

The book's title was *The Runes of Ktara*. The rhymes it contained all were written by a single woman.

"Might I suggest," Ktara said, staring into the fire, a brightness entering her green eyes, "that, before you make any decision as to what you will or will not do in response to Dr. Thorka's letter, you allow someone else a reading of its contents?"

There was no doubt in either man's mind who the

someone else was. If there were, she quickly dissolved it:

“It is, in any case, his feeding time.”

Harmon gathering the letter and a newspaper clipping from the desk . . . Cam moving behind the chair to move it out into the hall . . . Harmon saying to the woman, “Tell him nothing, I shall do it in my way.” . . .

Cam pressing the button next to the elevator panel . . . the panel sliding back into its recess . . . the two men and a woman entering—

No—the two men, but no woman. Entering the car were two men and a large black cat with sleek black fur and shining green eyes.

Cam touching a button inside the car, the bottom one of four . . . Cam making the sign of the cross and touching for luck the small silver cross hanging by its chain under his shirt . . . the door sliding open . . . another touch of another button . . . the fluorescent lights of the stone-walled, stone-floored basement flickering on.

Stepping out of the elevator . . . toward the thing in the center of the room.

Surrounded by workbenches and shelves filled with chemical and electronic equipment, it lay there in its dark majesty, its presence seeming to drain the very life from the whiteness of the layers of paint on the windowless walls and ceiling, leaving a bone-shade of decay; drawing to itself even the sounds of nature, the wild-whining wind, the surf-pounding spray, so that human ears would know they had wandered into some center of power, a power against which puny humanity could not hope to prevail, could not in any way deflect from its chosen path of dark and deadly doom.

It lay there in the center of the large room, the old, richly hand-tooled open casket.

He lay within, eyes closed, an amused smile on his face. A noble face, with aquiline nose and thick eyebrows which almost met at its bridge. The face sculpted with sharp, angular features and topped by thick black hair, combed back neatly, no hair out of its proper place. The body of the man was long—longer than that of the six-foot-five Puerto Rican—and, even within the impeccably pressed black formal eveningwear, the power of the frame was evident. Except that, impressive as the body's appearance was, it was understatement in the extreme.

The two men who drew near the casket knew that well. They also knew of other facial features, features which—

Which were not pleasant to think about, Cam reflected, again touching the silver cross on his breast. It was an old piece, from the island of Puerto Rico itself, a piece his grandmother had given him years ago. Now the old *abuela* was dead, God rest her soul. But she had known things, the old woman had. So many things, things her young grandson had thought old-fashioned, foreign, primitive. . . .

Harmon now had his eyes closed. It was time—time for him to use his telekinetic power to move the lever of the small unit implanted within him. When the lever moved it would interrupt a sonic signal which in turn would withdraw a sliver of wood—a tiny spine which had months ago been taken from a larger stake—from the heart of him who lay in the casket, the heart in which that larger stake had been imbedded and from which Cameron Sanchez himself had wrested it with trembling hands.

The telekinesis derived from occult knowledge, perhaps, but the rest, the coupled units implanted in the two bodies, represented the marvels of Science. The sliver

of wood could be reimplanted by two means. One was Harmon's will. The second would happen automatically—at Harmon's death. A bit of scientific insurance was what it amounted to.

Cam almost could hear his grandmother's laugh from the grave.

And as the aristocratic eyes of the man in the casket opened and his hands grasped the edges to lift himself upward, Cam wondered what his *abuela's* reaction to him would be. She, the old woman, full of superstition in which she thoroughly believed, would scream, he knew.

She would scream, not from surprise, but from knowledgeable terror.

"I hunger," Count Dracula said.

"Master," the woman said. She had crossed to the shelves where the red synthetic was stored in its bottles and had brought back a quantity of the fluid in a large silver goblet. The black cat was nowhere to be seen.

Cam turned his head. He did not like to watch Ktara's Master quench his hunger-thirst. Synthetic though it was, another of Harmon's accomplishments, it was too real. The smell of the liquid, for instance, was that which Cam had known many times. It was the stench of freshly spilled blood.

Even so, it was not to the Count's liking—as the goblet's clanging from the far stone wall demonstrated. He did not complain, however. In fact, his greeting was almost jovial:

"I am attended by all three of you," he said in the same foreign-to-speech accent as the woman. "Are there unusual causes behind this unusual circumstance?"

He had risen full now and had stepped from the casket. His eyes flashed red as he looked with disdain upon Cam,

with a certain respect upon Harmon and with a curious interest upon Ktara.

"She tells me nothing," he said to the professor. "That is unusual, as well. I am to suppose this is due to your express request?"

Harmon nodded. "I want you to read this newspaper article. It comes from a paper printed in Pitesti."

Count Dracula's eyebrows rose as he accepted the clipping. Reading it, he returned it to Harmon. "I have read it," he said.

"And you have no interest in its contents?"

"None—except for this Radu Conescu. I am curious why he hires laborers to work near my mountain."

Harmon's half-smile was fleeting, but missed by no one in the room. "I was speaking of the reference to vampires, Count."

"There has always been talk of such beings around my mountain," Dracula said. There was but a faint trace of irony in his tone. "The vampire, after all, is a creature of legend, Professor Harmon, and Romania is full of legends. As to these specific deaths, who can say—from this my present vantage point?"

"I'll accept that," Harmon said. "But this man Conescu—it is not a name you know?"

"It is not. Should it be?"

"He says he is related to you—by blood."

The Count laughed. "Interesting, but highly doubtful." His eyes narrowed slightly. "Why would the man tell such a story, I wonder."

Harmon was carefully watching the Count's face. "Perhaps he thinks it will assist him in his work. You were wrong about that, you know. His work is not in actual fact near your mountain."

"Not? But the news article says—"

"The article is ambiguous on that point, I'll admit. But the word should not be *near*, but *on*."

The Thorka letter now changed hands. The nobleman's reading of the English words was swift. When it was completed, his eyes were tight slits behind which red fire showed. His voice was hard.

"He digs for my gold."

Cam and Harmon exchanged quick glances. Ktara remained with her eyes on her Master.

He digs for my gold!"

"Gold," the professor repeated quietly.

"A horde of gold, Harmon. Gold that is mine, amassed over centuries, gold which none shall have save myself!"

Was it Cam's imagination, or were the Count's eyeteeth lengthening slightly?

"Harmon," the vampire said in a menacing tone. "I warn you. I must stop this man, I must—"

"You, my good Count, *must* do nothing—except those things I instruct you to do. Some weeks ago we made a wager, you and I, and you lost, the result of which placed you in my service for six months. Have you forgotten?" ***

"I have forgotten *nothing!*" A long tapered finger pointed downward toward the man in the wheelchair.

"Do not tempt the Fates, Harmon! Your doom will come one day, as you and I both know. You have won a short stay of execution, but you rush to the horrible death which will be yours if you think to try to keep me here in this place while across the seas—"

It was as if the professor were ignoring both the Count's words and his venomous delivery. "This gold of yours. I am at a loss to explain it. Why should you—you of all creatures—require a horde of gold?"

*** See *THE HAND OF DRACULA*, The Dracula Horror Series #2

The tapered finger stabbed toward Ktara.

"*She* has written of this! Harmon—I warn you once more—do not attempt to keep me from my purpose!"

Cam was certain now. The teeth *had* started to grow. The nostrils of the vampire had begun to flatten, and the hairline moved down toward the eyebrows. The eyes now were growing rounder, redder, with pit-black centers which—

Which Harmon also appeared to ignore.

"Your purpose, Count. No, I shall not attempt to keep you from your purpose—as long as it coincides with mine."

The bestial fang-filled jaws of the vampire opened with a roar of rage as the talon-ended fingers of both hands converged toward the seated man.

They never reached him. Harmon's eyes closed for but an instant, during which the energy wave within him touched the little lever implanted in his side.

Screaming with rage transformed into pain, the Count drew his hands back jerkily to his breast. He staggered back two steps, then sank to the stone floor.

Harmon's voice was level. "As I said, Count Dracula—as long as your purpose coincides with mine."

Cam now knew the incident for what it was, what it had been. Harmon had felt it was again necessary to demonstrate his physical power over the vampire. He had done so. Still, Cam did not feel all that secure when Ktara picked up the professor's final remark for comment.

"It will, Professor," she said quietly. And as she spoke, the storm outside in the blackness—the swirling blizzard and the crashing surf beyond the stone walls—beat suddenly with more vengeance upon their natural and man-made constraints.

"I assure you, Professor Harmon, it will!"

CHAPTER 4

It was uncanny. From early morning to early evening the snow had fallen on Dracula Mountain. In thick flakes it came, flakes which banded together as if they were somehow welded one to another to form never-ending blankets of white falling, layer upon layer, on the mountain top.

Uncanny. Not only in the consistency of the snow and its dawn-to-dusk period of falling, but in the fact that the snowfall seemed to have one sole target—the castled mountain. The village of Arefu received very little of it, the nearby town of Pitesti received none at all. It was as if—

Some force wished the work on the mountain top to cease for a day?

“Ridiculous!” the young man said, pushing a fresh stein of beer across the wooden table to his companion. “You should get such ideas out of your head, Mercea.”

The second young man looked past the flickering hearth to the black window at the right of it. “And yet, Nicholae, the snow is no more now. Even the mountain lies still. Why is that, I ask you?”

“For Mercea to ask is simple. For the more difficult part, the answer, he looks to Nicholae. This is friendship? Drink your beer before wild thoughts turn it stale.”

“Wild thoughts. It was not Nicholae’s sister who was

buried last week or he would not talk in that way. I say that the snowfall is a sign. I say that whatever Conescu is having us do on that mountain is evil and that someone or something made it snow this day to keep us from doing it."

"You also say that Conescu is a vampire, a thought similar to those you have just been repeating."

"Is he not related to the old Count? Does he himself not say so?"

Nicholae sighed. "Mercea. Yes, he said so, and that is my point. If in fact Radu Conescu was a vampire, do you think he would go around saying he was any relation to the Dracula who lived on that mountain and terrorized the people of this village? Does he not also say that his reason for digging up there is to clear his old relation's name of such guilt? Really, Mercea, how do we know—really know—that the Count Dracula our elders speak of was in fact a vampire? Do we of this day and age believe all of the old wives' tales about things which are helpful in sickness? When, for example, was the last time you smeared the juice of the garlic on your temples to cure a headcold?"

"That has nothing to do with it! Nicholae, my sister was murdered!"

"So she was, and you of all people have reason to know who the prime suspect should be. Myself, the man who loved her deeply—the man who, when he swilled a little too much beer, swore he would stick a long and sharp knife between the ribs of this interloper, this swine Stelian who—"

"Be still. It is not wise to speak ill of the dead, no matter what the measure of your hatred. It is enough that the police—and I—know you could not have done this thing."

Nicholae's features tensed. "The perfect alibi, yes?"

Sick with drunkenness and being cared for all night by the brother of my love—who, by going off with this outlander, caused my drunkenness in the first place. Yes, perfect—except for the fact that a drunken man can do little to protect his loved ones!”

“And now who is shouting?”

“I—was,” Nicholae completed quietly.

“And can the man who loved my sister—a match I did not wholly approve of, Nicholae, but one I would have preferred over that of she and this Stelian of whom I knew nothing—can you tell me who did kill her?”

“Why must there be a who? Could not the wolves—”

“My sister’s eyes, Nicholae. Remember them. But more important, remember *his*.”

Yes, the eyes. When the bodies had been discovered on the mountain, Mercea had been called over, and Nicholae had rushed to the scene. Neither had far to run in that both were in the employ of the self-proclaimed blood-relation of Dracula. The bodies had been among the ruins, their throats slashed, their life’s blood everywhere, fouling the morning whiteness of the crisp snow surface of earth and unroofed stone. But it was their eyes to which the onlookers were drawn—and from which they were repulsed.

Death was reflected in them, but something more. Horror was the paramount emotion. The distorted lines of their faces with mouths twisted as if to scream were terrifying enough alone, but the eyes were what said it all.

“You are right, Mercea,” Nicholae said softly. “No wolf or pack of wolves by itself could have caused that look—not on the face of the proud, strong Stelian.”

“Which also would seem to exclude any other *human* attacker as well. Hate him though you might have, Nicholae, my sister’s outlander could take care of himself in

a fight, by the look of him. So what does that leave us with?"

Nicholae was quiet for a time, swilling the beer around in his stein. "I do not know."

"Drink your beer, my friend," Mercea said. "I do not *know*, either. But tonight may be the time to investigate. Our employer, the cursed Conescu, has gone by car to Tirgoviste this night. He will not be back. I think perhaps this is the time I have been awaiting. I ask you to come with me."

"With you?" Nicholae said warily.

"I have no idea what I'm looking for, but I must do something. Whatever it is, it is up there."

"Up there," Nicholae repeated softly. "On the mountain."

"On the mountain."

From the tavern, they walked the deserted main street of the village up to the beginning of the trail which Conescu had widened in order that his men and equipment might pass up the mountainside with more ease.

"You see, Nicholae—how easy it is to climb our mountain. Not like the old days, when a man would risk his very neck to reach the summit. Nature looks out for us as well, my friend. The night is not as cold as is usually the case at this season."

Nicholae frowned. "You have had too much beer. The night is cold enough to chill the very marrow of my bones. As for the ease in climbing we have before us, it was not lack of that which caused us not to ascend the mountain, but other things."

"Vampires, Nicholae? Are you changing your views now that we actually are ascending?"

"It is easy to be a skeptic when surrounded by the

light and warmth of a tavern, Mercea. Out here—I do not know what I believe.”

As they moved up the trail, there was the sense of moving from the world of the known to that of the unknown, from the world of taverns and homes and communion of men to a world where no man walked. The fact that the pathway before them contained no footprints but was covered with the smooth sheet of virgin snow had something to do with this impression, but it was more than that. The moonlight, filtering through the thin veil of cloud-cover, cast an eerie pallor upon the snow and the misshapen trees among which they now were moving. There was something else, too.

The quiet. The deadly quiet of the mountainside which grew upon both young men as they climbed higher and higher, leaving the sound of the swift-running Arges behind them. The river sound was one an Arefu villager took for granted, a sound that formed part of the natural backdrop to all human activity within its neighborhood. The slow muffling of the rushing water, its by-degrees elimination as a tangible experience, had its effect on both men. And yet, had not they both climbed this mountain many times in recent days—and had not the river sounds diminished in the same way? Assuredly, but on those mornings there were other sounds which took the place of that of the Arges. Human speech, for example. Here, now, tonight, there was nothing.

Nothing except the stillness into which they walked, a stillness which, like a curtain, seemed to surround them and to drive back into their ears the spongy sounds of their boots entering and drawing from the surface of the snow they were violating.

It is true, Nicholae thought. We are violating something here. The very look of the white snow above and beyond us is telling us that. And the trees—their branches

—they seem to be reaching out, to form a pleading barricade which cries to warn us that we should proceed no farther. But we cannot hear them, because the silence around us is so loud. A loud silence? Yes, yes—"Yes!"

Mercea jumped as if hit by lightning.

"You frightened me, Nicholae. This place is bad enough without your suddenly shouting like that."

"Then you feel it too—the evil about us, surrounding us?"

"I feel it, yes. But then I knew it would be here. I tried to tell you that back at the tavern. Yes, it is here. And it will get even stronger—as we climb closer to the reaches of the ruined stones."

Nicholae followed Mercea's eyes to the mountain top. Between two of the great stone fingershaped outcroppings, the time-worn walls of Castle Dracula loomed black against the dark gray sky. It stood as if challenging the village below, challenging the people of Arefu to storm its bastions, and knowing full well that they would never do so. In the related histories of the period when Count Dracula held sway within those walls of stone, it was a fact that no one ever tried, no one ever gave the adventure serious thought. Not at night, not even in the full light of the warm summer sun. Never. Yet, here they were, the two of them—

"Mercea. I do not think we should—"

But Mercea had resumed his movement toward the great stone fingers.

"Mercea!"

A wolf howled in reply. Mercea turned, a strange twisted smile on his lips.

"You wake the wolves, Nicholae. You also fall behind me." He turned his back on his companion.

"No, Mercea—wait. *Wait!*"

Stumbling in the drifts, he ran to catch up with his

companion. The other looked back and obliged him by waiting.

Panting from the effort, Nicholae grasped Mercea by the sleeve.

"We must not go any farther. Please, Mercea—we must return to the village at once!"

Mercea looked with disdain at the trembling gloved hand that clutched his arm. The same look was transferred to the clutcher's face.

"And you said to me that you loved my sister!"

"I did. But this is no way to—"

"And I say it is the way! What else do we do, Nicholae—what else? Do we leave things to the police? Just what progress have they made to date? What progress do we expect them to make? My sister, Nicholae, lies dead. I cannot turn my face from that."

"Nor can I, I assure you, my friend. But we must be reasonable!"

The twisted smile widened.

"I am being reasonable, just as you advised me. If you say so, Nicholae, I will believe in wolves as being the instruments of my sister's death. If you say so, I will believe that vampires do not exist. I will even believe that Castle Dracula itself does not exist—neither that nor the all-pervasive evil we both feel to be thick about us—if you say it, Nicholae. Say it, why don't you?"

"I—I cannot. As you say, I too feel—"

"And I, Nicholae, feel that this snowfall is a sign. With the sign came our opportunity—Radu Conescu's departure for the night. You see, then, that there is but one night in which I can hope to learn something—anything—about the death of someone I—we—loved. I intend to grasp this opportunity. If, of course, you release your grasp upon my coat sleeve."

As Mercea's eyes dropped to the clutching hand, it released itself from his arm. Still, however, it trembled.

"Are you—are you not afraid, Mercea?"

The dead girl's brother relaxed the tenseness of his face. "I am very much afraid, my friend. I have no reason to try to appear brave before you, especially when I do not know if my heart will allow me even to act out a braveness I certainly do not feel. But I am continuing, nonetheless. I do not ask you to go farther. You may return to the village if that is your wish. I give you my word that I will not hold your decision against you. In truth, such a decision might well be the wisest one."

"But let us both go back—at least, let us form some plan of action. Perhaps get ourselves some weapons."

Mercea laughed. "Weapons?"

A wolf howled.

"Weapons," Mercea repeated. "Perhaps against the likes of the howling one some sort of knife or gun would be of help. But the being I seek cannot be touched by those. Here, Nicholae—here is my weapon. *Our* weapon, if you still are with me."

From within his jacket Mercea took an object fashioned from wrought iron. It was a cross.

"That?" Nicholae said. "That is your weapon? But—but that is naught but a weapon of superstition!"

Mercea placed the cross back into his coat. "Perhaps, but then as you yourself said, the vampire is naught but a creature of superstition. It would seem to me that our weapon is therefore most fitting. In any case, I continue to the castle. With you, if that is your wish; if not, without you."

As Mercea turned toward the mountain top and stepped off, Nicholae knew he would not look back. The time for words was over. There only was the sound of boots breaking into the snow—and there! Another wolf

sending its howl up at the doomridden sky. He would have to decide now, he knew. Whether to join his friend, his beloved's brother, in this stupidity, or to swallow his shame and return downward to the village. Mercea would find nothing, he was sure of that—nothing to solve the mystery of his sister's death. But what else might he find? What else, on the crest of the mountain, was lying there in wait, waiting for the unbidden, unwelcome foot of the trespasser to—

No. He could not do it. Let Mercea say what he would upon his next seeing him. Let him call him coward, fool, false lover—let his tongue do its worst. He could not—would not—

What was *that*?

A movement to his left, something white. Gone now, but it was there—it was! White like the snow, but standing against the dark wood some fifty yards from him. There! There it was again!

A flowing, ghostlike—

Mercea! The thing, whatever it was, was going along the edge of the woods, circling up toward the castle. It would find Mercea there, unless Nicholae—

Did what? Cry out an alarm, call Mercea's name? He doubted that Mercea would pay him any mind, not now. And Mercea had gotten up far past the stone fingers, so far he would maybe not hear the call. But that other thing—*that* might hear him! No. If he was going to save his friend, he would have to reach him before . . .

But did he dare?

He must dare!

He ran, with long and difficult strides through the thick snow, he ran with full steam toward the black ruins of Castle Dracula.

“Mercea! Thank God!”

Panting, puffing, Nicholae gripped his friend by both shoulders.

"Quickly, Mercea—we must escape!"

His voice was a whisper, but surrounded as they were by what once had been an elegant receiving hall, even that small sound seemed to echo from walls which rejected all sound.

"Mercea—please! Before it is too late!"

"Too late for what, Nicholae? Escape from what? I have seen nothing."

"The white thing—the thing I saw! It was coming this way. It—"

Why have you come to my castle?"

The heads of both young men snapped to the stone stairwell from which the woman spoke. Dressed in white, she was in a nightdress, her arms and face white-blue from the cold. A ghostly apparition she might have been—except that both men recognized her face.

"Must I repeat myself? Why have you come to this place?"

Mercea swallowed hard. "We have come to learn something of murder, Miss Conescu."

The thin-limbed woman smiled. "And perhaps you shall, young man, perhaps you shall."

"I speak of the murder of my sister and her friend. I would ask you what you might know about it."

"I?" A deep throaty laugh. "What *I* know about the murder of two insignificant peasants? Why should *I* know anything about such matters?"

Mercea's voice was harsh. "That is a question only you can answer, but I *will* have your answer!"

Another laugh as the woman looked from Mercea to Nicholae, then back to the former. Her eyes seemed to be brightening with excitement.

"Very well. If you so will, I shall not hold from you

whatever knowledge I have of the affair. It is not considerable, really. I could not tell you their full names, to be truthful, but I suppose that does not matter much. What matters is that I was here—right here in this place—*when they died.*”

“*Stand back!*” Nicholae cried out, throwing his hands out as if to push back her advance. For a moment it seemed as if his movement had stopped hers, but her amusement denied it. She spoke not to him but again to Mercea.

“Your companion stands on the very brink of madness, young man. I know the signs. Look at the terror in his face, his trembling hands, his shaking knees. It would be a kindness for me to end his worthless life. Do you agree with that?”

Mercea’s eyes narrowed. “As you ended the lives of the others?”

“Why should I deign to bother lying to you? Yes—as I ended their lives. As I intend to end yours.”

She now had reached the bottom of the stairs, her eyes wild with anticipation. From the corners of her mouth, saliva began to flow, glistening in the beam of hazy moonlight which now suddenly struck her face. Her lips—*so red!*—and parting now to reveal teeth which looked so—

And now her eyes flashed upon Nicholae.

“Tell me I am beautiful.”

“T-tell y-you . . .”

“Tell me I am beautiful and I will spare your life. Tell me you would like to kiss me.”

“I—I—”

“*Let him be!*” Mercea commanded. “You cannot win tonight, she-devil! I hold in my hand your bane. Here, see it more clearly in the light!”

He thrust his hand toward her. In it was the wrought-iron cross.

The woman laughed. She laughed with her head thrown back as if in the presence of some wildly funny joke, as if she was experiencing an attack of hysteria. Just as suddenly as it began, the laughter stopped. Her voice was as ice.

"Count Dracula himself would be pleased—by the elements of the legend he has left behind, by the superstitious dolts who believe to this day that such implements can save them from the reality of a horrible death. But you see, my healthy full-blooded young man, the death I offer is not all that horrible. There is no torture in my death, the pain is but momentary. You will see."

Quickly she turned to Nicholae. "You will see, too. But you shall not die. You have a face and body I admire, nervous as you are. You shall I love tonight—if you are willing. And I think that you will be willing. What do you think?"

"I—I don't know. . . ."

"I understand. The madness seizes you, grips you so that you dare not move. Is that not true?"

"I—"

Dare not move," she commanded, a long tapered finger thrust at him. And it was so. He *could not* move! Not even when she—

She turned back to Mercea. "I am anxious to join with my insane lover," she said maliciously. "But for your accusations against me, you might have been my choice. But, then, you are all too sane. You would remember my saying I was responsible for the death of your sister and her love. Therefore, I have no real choice. You yourself chose to die when tonight you climbed this mountain and invaded my castle."

Mercea did not flinch at her advance toward him. "If

the spiritual power of this cross cannot stop you, it will serve as a useful bludgeon."

"You will not find it all that useful, I guarantee you that," she returned.

She was close enough now that, with a stride forward, Mercea could strike her dead.

He tried.

He screamed.

With eyes that somehow could not blink, Nicholae watched his friend die. Horrible, *horrible!* Yet he watched. And the most horrible part, the part that he knew his mind could not, would not take, was to come.

Shortly her business with Mercea was ended. She turned her back on the crumpled form of the young man and moved to the front of Nicholae.

"I am cold," she said, a touch of disdain in her voice. "Warm my lips, warm my body, and you will live through this night."

As her ice-flesh arms went around his neck and her blood-red lips moved up toward his, Nicholae wanted to scream. But he could not, he did not dare. He'd seen what had happened to Mercea. If he did not please this woman, the same thing would . . .

So he did not scream, not outwardly. But as she grasped the back of his head and pulled his lips to hers of a strangely fluid hotness, something within him strained to scream inwardly.

And that something snapped under the cross-purposed pressure.

CHAPTER 5

"Why gold?" Harmon asked.

It was late afternoon. Ktara had brought the professor a cup of coffee from the kitchen of the modernized old Westhampton house. His question seemed to take her by surprise. It was, Harmon reflected, the first time he'd ever seen the woman taken by surprise.

"Why is gold so important to your master?" he clarified.

She smiled. "You have read my words on the subject, have you not?"

He had. There were, throughout the pages of Ktara's *Runes*, several mentions of the bright yellow metal, most of them referring to the tribute gold received from peoples of many times and places. Three references, however, were of specific interest, the first of which related to that "first land" as Ktara called it. It was at the time of the destruction of the island or continent, whichever, of what in some myths is known as Atlantis or Eden. The entire passage spoke of a frantic effort on the part of her master to save himself—and, perhaps, his slave.

The quickly fashioned arrow-mold

Received its molten gift of gold.

When hardened, cast was broken free.

"And now we make our own decree!"

The Master said, and climbed the tower,

Misjudging Fate and the Old Gods' power.

The second passage was shorter. Referring to a lacquered chest filled with gold that the Son of the Dragon received from his Tibetan worshippers, it spoke of his reaction:

*He had hoped for more,
Much more than this,
For the melting pot
Of the golden k'ris.*

And the third passage, time and place Medieval Europe:

*Prepare! Prepare!
He must not err,
Not the next time.
But when?
When will the next time,
The second time—
The final time?—
When will it come?*

"I have read your words, yes," Harmon said to the woman. "Some sort of weapon, it appears. The *arrow* of the first land, and the *k'ris* of ancient Tibet—a long, thin knife or sword, I believe. A weapon, to be used against . . . who, Ktara? The Old Gods? Is it that he expects them to return again? Or have they not in fact left but instead lie dormant and—"

"Your powers of reason are superior to those of most men, Professor Harmon, but the entire answer is not to be found in my pages."

"And you will not elaborate."

"No, I will not. Perhaps one day . . . but, then, it is to be hoped that the day does not come in which . . ."

Ktara shuddered. She had turned her face from the professor so that he could not witness her discomfort, but he saw it nonetheless. Perhaps realizing that he had, she

added in a low voice, "There are, Professor, things of nature and time which operate in cycles. Because they do, man has been able to learn much of the Cosmos. But there are other things which do not take place in the confinement of regularity, which is why—"

"Which is why you cannot predict the *when* of this *second and final time*, whatever it is."

She nodded. "Which is why I cannot predict—why no one can predict the *when* of this second and final time, whatever it is."

Her repetition of his words signaled that the subject of the gold was closed, at least that one aspect of it. But there was another aspect about which he was sure she would inform him.

"How much, Ktara? How much gold does your master have under his mountain—in terms of U.S. dollars?"

"Billions," she said, then added, "in terms of *present* U.S. dollars, of course. Naturally, if all that gold were released on the world markets . . ."

She did not finish. Harmon appeared not to be listening. His thoughts appeared to be elsewhere.

In actuality his thoughts were on that gold—that staggering amount of gold which, even with his wealth, was difficult to grasp in one mental image. Billions. If Conescu—

Harmon gestured to the envelope which had come to the manor in the morning mail.

"Ivor Ivanovitch Petrov."

"Conescu?"

"One of his names, one of the first by which he is entered upon the Interpol record. An interesting character, a man of several professions, espionage for one. His employers before, during and after the Second World War were, respectively, the Russians, Germans and British. Those at least are the *known* employers. In be-

tween these periods of documented service to governments and after he seemed to have tired of the craft of spying, his record contains mentions of proficiency in heroin smuggling, counterfeiting and theft of rare art works. A well-rounded person is our Mr. Radu Conescu."

Ktara laughed. "So much so that his purpose in digging for my Master's wealth is difficult to ascertain from his background. Does he wish it only for himself, or is he in the employ of some government? Of course, it really would not seem to make all that much difference."

"Billions," Harmon said. "Billions. That much gold in the hands of such a man . . ."

"Agreed. When do we depart?"

Harmon looked at her smiling eyes steadily.

"As soon as is possible."

CHAPTER 6

As the Boeing 747 took off from Kennedy International Airport, Cam Sanchez concentrated on the silver lighter he used to light his long cheroot and on the two words that occupied his brain.

Déjà vu.

The feeling that something you're doing now is something you've done before. A weird feeling, one which had its share of scientific explanations, and one which Cam was experiencing in full. Beyond the mere instant-flash of most *déjà vu* experiences, however, he was feeling he now was living through a whole set of experiences a second time. Even down to the long cigar.

Cameron Sanchez did not smoke, not normally, except when he found himself on an airplane. It was not that he didn't like airplanes, but something more intense: he simply was afraid of them. The safety statistics the airlines cited meant nothing to him, nor did their comparisons with automobile death statistics. In an automobile, especially when he was driving, the controls were in his hands. Any mishap would be his own fault and he'd get what he deserved. Even in cases where something took place which was the other guy's fault, or if he did not happen to be behind the wheel, he still might have the opportunity to bail out. Sure, *terra firma* might prove a

little too firm, but there always was the chance that you could live through the dive.

On the other hand, a dive to *terra firma* from thirty thousand feet . . .

He ordered a double brandy from one of the first class stewardesses in the first class compartment.

Déjà vu.

The cigar, the brandy, the pushcarts laden with all kinds of food. The same feeling of insecurity, accompanied by the same feeling of luxury which comes to a Puerto Rican raised in poverty. What was more, it was the same flight. Six thirty P.M., to arrive at Zurich the next morning at 8:30. Same as the last—that first—time, with the privately chartered jet taking them from Zurich to Bucharest. Same arrangements, with Dr. Alexandru Thorka no doubt again awaiting them at the Romanian airport.

Déjà vu.

But with some differences in fact if not in emotion.

That first time they had gone to Europe to collect something. Now they were returning with it—the long crate in the cargo hold of the 747. That first time they had gone to subdue a dark fiend. Now they were using him to subdue another. That first time there had been just himself and Harmon in the first class compartment. Now there were three of them.

Ktara suddenly stepped out into the aisle. She had been sitting in the seat in front of Cam, and now she looked at him with steady eyes.

“You win,” she said.

He arched his eyebrows.

“That cigar. I’m afraid I am forced to locate a No Smoking section.”

Cam smiled inwardly as she moved toward the rear of

the cabin. If memory served, it was the only time he'd defeated her at anything.

The chartered plane at Zurich turned out to be owned by the same company they had used on their first flight to Bucharest. Upon reaching the flight's destination at close to 6:30 P.M., Cam was not surprised to see that the car which roared up to meet them was the same kind of official vehicle which he had seen before. The salt-and-pepper beard in the rear of the black limousine also was familiar.

"Welcome, gentlemen," Thorka said in an Oxford accent. "Ah, and a lady as well?"

"Alex, this is Ktara," Harmon said as Cam assisted him from his wheelchair to the rear seat beside Thorka. "She is an associate of mine."

"A very comely associate, Damien," was Thorka's comment. "You have a knack, if I may say so, of selecting excellent physical specimens for your assistants. Welcome to you, Miss Ktara—and to you, Mr. Sanchez."

Cam took the hand which was extended to him. The old man's grip was firm.

"Please," Thorka said, "get into the car, both of you. I have another vehicle which will take care of your luggage. It will follow us to Pitesti."

Cam moved to the other side of the vehicle, to the door opposite the driver. Releasing its catch, he held it open for Ktara.

"No," she said with a smile. "I think that I should ride in the other conveyance. To make sure that everything is loaded and arrives safely."

Thorka looked surprised. "I assure you, young lady, that no one will tamper with—"

She smiled. "Dr. Thorka, that was the farthest thing from my thoughts. It is just that some of the equipment

we carry is highly sensitive. I just want to be sure that nothing is damaged. Would you not agree, Professor Harmon?"

Harmon returned the woman's smile. "As you wish."

The attention of all now turned to the unloading of the chartered plane. Harmon was interested in Thorka's reaction to the long crate. Thorka, on his part, was interested in Harmon's interest.

"Some kind of digging device, Damien? Or is it something electronic?"

"It could be either, Alex. Of course, if you're asking officially, as, perhaps, would an official of Romanian Customs . . ."

Thorka laughed. "You shall not have to be bothered with such formalities."

"In which case, Alex, I should not have to bother with an explanation as to the contents of my baggage. *Any* explanation. Is that not so?"

Thorka's eyes twinkled. "You are a fox, Damien. But then that should come as no surprise to me, should it? No, it should not." He gestured toward a black panel truck which was approaching the aircraft. "Young lady, there is your vehicle. I'm afraid the driver speaks no English, so if you wish to change your mind—"

"I have some ability in Romanian," she replied.

"Odd," Thorka said to Harmon, after he gave instructions to the limousine driver to depart. "Very odd."

"That Ktara can speak Romanian? It's not a dead language, after all."

Thorka shook his head. "No, not that. Her name. Ktara. You see, in my researches regarding the vampire of Dracula Mountain, I have come across the name."

"Ktara?" Harmon asked. "A woman?"

"No. That is the odd part. According to the stories—ah, but stories are just stories, are they not?"

"They are not, and we both know it, Alex. *What*, according to the stories?"

Thorka waved his hand as if dismissing the idea. Nonetheless, he voiced it:

"A cat, Damien. Can you believe that, according to the stories told about the fearsome and brutal Count Dracula, he maintained as a pet—a pet!—a common black cat, the name of which was Ktara. Coincidence aside, can *you* believe that, Mr. Sanchez?"

Turning in his seat, Cam looked from Harmon to Thorka.

"Well, Dr. Thorka, legends being what they are, I guess I'd have no choice."

"To translate, Alex," Harmon said with a wry grin, "he believes it."

Romania. A communist country, if labels are applied strictly. The Socialist Republic of Romania, if formal names are applied strictly. A country split by the Carpathian and Transylvanian Alpine mountain system, a country of twenty million people whose history is bathed in blood. The expert in political geography is often quick to point out that the almost incessant bloodshed in the land results primarily from the location of that vast mountain system which, stemming westward from the Black Sea, forms a natural barrier between the two Danube Basins and thus forms—to the north and to the south of the high crests of rock—a natural road for armies bent on subduing other armies. The political geographer may be right, in that the country's twenty-three-century history resounds with battle horns and screams and the last cries of slaughtered Slavs, Magyars, Turks, Germans and Russians, among others. But it is not the entire story, as any political geographer—or anyone

else—would know if he spent a number of nights in the mountain wilds.

Just as to call Romania “communist” is an oversimplification, which the Russian neighbor to the north knows full well, so does the “natural gateway” explanation of the blood-bathed soil. There is something about the actual terrain of the country, the way in which the trees seem to beckon to the stranger, the way the natives seem to shun the trees and the stranger, the way the mountains look black with a blackness not experienced elsewhere—there is, even on the brightest day of summer, something in the very air of the mountain regions which whispers of a dark secret. And in winter, when night falls . . .

“Mr. Sanchez—is the countryside as you remember it?”

They now were well out of Bucharest, traveling northwest to Pitesti, a sixty-five mile trip. It would take something over two hours to traverse the distance, mainly because of the several small towns and villages whose streets demanded slow-to-crawling speeds.

“It is darker,” Cam returned.

“You will find, I’m afraid, that Arefu also will be darker. Not only in physical things, but in those of the spirit.” He turned to Harmon. “I should perhaps have cabled you regarding the latest development, but I assumed it would not change your purpose to come. There has been another murder on Dracula’s Mountain.”

“When?”

“Four days ago. A young man, the brother of the girl who previously was murdered.”

“And the circumstances?” Harmon asked.

“In some respects, the same as the others. Torn throat, a severed jugular vein through which much blood was lost. The death occurred at night, as in the other case.”

"In some respects," Harmon repeated. "There are, then, some differences?"

Thorka nodded. "One primarily. Namely, a witness, a survivor—although one must use that term with care. Unfortunately, the boy is in a bad way. He came into the village screaming, awakening almost everyone with his howling. Like a wolf he howled, as if he had been transformed into that animal temporarily."

"It passed, I take it?"

"It did, but gave way not to rational speech. Instead there is just an incessant babbling, very incoherent although the police official keeping watch has thought he heard the words *she-devil* and *ghost-woman*. This may be complete imagination on his part, however, as within Arefu rumors are rife. Naturally, the primary subjects of these are Radu Conescu and his niece. Her name is Dava, an unusual name, but owned by an unusual woman. One who, when you see her I trust you will agree, has the air of mystery about her. In that respect, she is not unlike your associate who follows in the truck behind us. However, I would be doing an unkindness to—ah—"

"Ktara," Harmon supplied.

"Yes. Ktara, of course. As I say, I would be doing an unkindness and an injustice as well to Ktara if I did not say that her beauty far surpasses that of Dava Conescu.

It also would appear that she is much younger than the Conescu woman."

Thorka's use of the words *would appear* was lost on neither Harmon nor Cam. The exchange of glances between them, furthermore, was not lost on the old Romanian. With a clearing of his throat expressing satisfaction, he moved the subject back to the Conescu:

"Your cable was to the point in terms of your visiting

us, Damien, but you said nothing of what you may have learned with respect to the man and his niece."

Harmon filled him in on what background detail he had on the man. "Of the woman we know nothing, in that we had no fingerprints for her. There seems to be no woman appearing with regularity in any of Conescu's records. Perhaps we shall learn more when we have had a chance to meet her."

"Perhaps," Thorka agreed. "And as to their mission upon Dracula Mountain—have you any thoughts as to what it might really be?"

"Some," Harmon said. "But divulging them at this time might be a bit premature."

Thorka smiled. "Well, in that I fancy myself an archaeologist and as such a one deals in reasoning much like the police detective, perhaps I might make a contribution in this regard—purely from the facts which have so far been presented. Would such an exercise be fruitful?"

Harmon shrugged. "Such exercises are the mainstay of detective work. In fiction, of course, more than fact."

"Let us be fanciful nonetheless. Conescu's history shows him to have been a spy and a criminal. If we ask ourselves which of the two occupations has brought him to Arefu, we must also ask ourselves two further questions. One, what is there in Arefu or in its vicinity worth spying on? Two, what is there in the same area worth a criminal endeavor? The first question is answered quite simply. There is nothing in the region worth the attention of the professional spy."

"No secret missile bases tucked away in the mountains?" Cam asked. "After all, the top of Castle Dracula commands a fairly good view for miles around."

"That is true, young man. But does one dig holes within the earth on one mountain so that one can gain a better

view as to what might be nestled between other mountains?"

"Not directly, no sir. But that could be a decoy action."

"A what?"

"Decoy," Harmon said. "A diversionary action, something to substantiate why he came to the region, when in reality—"

Thorka interrupted. "An expensive diversionary action, I would say. He's had to double the wages of the men, due to the murders. And yet your logic has a certain soundness about it—or it would have, if in fact there were anything in the mountains nearby to warrant the interest of an espionage agent. But, as I say, there is not. You will have to accept that on faith."

"Consider it accepted. Which brings us to Conescu's second occupation, that of criminal."

"And his fields of specialization. Heroin smuggler, counterfeiter, art thief. Taking them in order, we begin with the heroin. A huge cache of the—how you say?—*stuff* buried on the mountain? Not likely. You will recall, Damien, that it was not so long ago that *no one* would venture upon the mountain at all. It has only been since the return of the wolves. That someone with a fortune in the drug would choose that particular locale to hide it, I find most inconceivable. And yet, whatever it is our Mr. Conescu is seeking, it truly must be valuable, must it not? Counterfeit bills of some currency? I find the same problem with that idea, although it may well be that he put this particular skill to use in creating the papers by which he entered my country. If so, he is highly skilled."

Harmon nodded. "So it has been reputed."

"So, also, we come to his interest in art theft. And here I see a glimmer of possibility. It is, after all, well known that, in the days when Castle Dracula was built,

accompanying such structures was some sort of tunnelings. Used primarily for escape when the castle was under attack, many of these tunnels were enlarged to contain sizable underground storage vaults. It would be a distinct possibility that Count Dracula might have had such a room at his disposal."

Cam turned around to face the Doctor. "For his art treasures, you mean. Was the Count said to be a collector?"

"Oh yes, young man. A very keen collector, at least from the old stories."

"Interesting," Cam said. "I would not have thought—" He caught himself. "From what I've read, I mean, I wouldn't have thought him to be a patron of the arts."

Thorka's eyes again twinkled. "But he was. A very cultured man was Count Dracula with very, very refined tastes in art. Of paintings and sculpture he is said to have acquired examples of the best from many ages, but seemingly he had one overpowering desire for one particular kind of artwork."

"Which was?" Harmon asked.

"Gold, Damien. Somewhat indiscriminately, his thirst for anything and everything fashioned from the metal is said to have matched his thirst for the blood of living humans."

Harmon nodded. "So you conclude that what may lie under that mountain is a great horde of gold?"

Thorka raised a forefinger. "Not at all. The careful detective does not make such a logical jump. He but recognizes that stories of such a horde exist—and are rather widespread. Then he recognizes that such stories easily could have reached the ears of one such as Radu Conescu—one who now claims to have been related to the Count. The detective also takes into account that, in light of the expense Conescu is incurring, whatever does lie

underground must be of much greater potential value, especially when he also considers the fact that a professional such as Conescu would hardly bother occupying his time with something yielding a reward which he might classify as paltry. Then, too, there are the killings. A professional thief does not kill—not unless the stakes are very high.”

“That,” Harmon said, “presupposes that it was Conescu who was responsible for the deaths. There are the other alternatives which have been suggested.”

Thorka ticked them off. “Wolves, vampires, a jealous lover. A Romanian steeped in the love of my country, I cannot dismiss the possibility of the first two alternatives, however remote—but the third clearly is impossible.”

“Another matter of faith?” Harmon asked.

“The youth—he who even now lies with muddled mind in a doctor’s house—was her lover. And he has a perfect—how you say?—*alibi* for the night of the first two killings. No, that is not a matter of faith, Damien. That is a matter of fact.”

It was not, however, a matter of fact agreed upon by all concerned. Alexandru Thorka learned this firsthand when the black limousine was crossing the River Arges into Pitesti. Drawing the attention of his two American guests to what looked to be a fire farther down the river bank, he commented on the oddity of it. The bridge crossed, he ordered the car stopped parallel to a villager who was running toward the blaze. He asked two questions and received two curt answers. As the villager ran on, Thorka directed his driver to move with haste to Arefu.

“A fire?” Harmon asked.

“Yes, one of a very special kind. The survivor-lover of whom we just were speaking—they are preparing to burn him alive!”

CHAPTER 7

"Kill the vampire! Burn him!"

Thorka did not have to supply a translation of the cries of the crowd. Harmon's Romanian was not all that rusty, and Cam needed no language lessons to comprehend the content of what was repeated again and again by the men brandishing the torches of wood and dragging their victim to the prematurely started blaze.

"Kill him—kill him!"

The streets leading to the center of the village were packed with men—all of them were men—and as the limousine pushed its way through the crowd with agonizing slowness Cam could see that all the windows facing the central square were closed tightly. As in the American West, vigilante mobs, whether bent on lynching or burning, kept their womenfolk at home.

"Damien, stay in the car. Mr. Sanchez, please—I will need your imposing figure!"

Before Cam had his door open, Thorka was out and shoving his way through to the place where the fire roared. Several times burly townsmen turned to sneer at the old intellectual, then seeing his manner of dress and the black limousine behind him changed their expression to one of unsure respect. It was, however, the sight of the bullet-headed giant closing the distance behind the old man that caused their decision to step out of what might be harm's

way. The huge man had a look on his face that meant deadly business. Concealed in the waistband of his trousers he also had something else which meant deadly business, a .357 Magnum Smith & Wesson. At this point in time, though, Cam knew full well that the gun, if he pulled it, would be more for psychological effect than anything else. In a mad crowd such as that he was slicing through, his fists and feet could accomplish more, more swiftly and more deadly.

If it came to that. He hoped it wouldn't. His taking on a whole village had not been in the plans he and Harmon had mapped out.

The captive, his eyes wild and mouth frothing, was held by three men, two holding his outspread arms and the third with an arm lock on the young man's head. There was little in the way of struggle as they moved him steadily toward the licking, snapping flames which formed the focus of the shouting mob which, at a respectful distance, surrounded the blaze.

"Burn the killer! Burn the devil!"

"No!" Thorka roared, stepping into the circle between the wall of men and the sheet of flame. "You must not do this thing!"

Heads turned toward the well-dressed stranger and for a moment there was silence. Then a section of the crowd parted to allow another man into the circle. Thin to the point of appearing to be nothing but taut sinew, his misshapen mouth under a beaklike nose spewed out its words like poisonous darts:

"We do what we must. Mind your business, you who are not of this village!" He pointed a finger at the three men holding Nicholae. "Throw him to the flames!"

"I say *no!*" Thorka boomed.

"Ignore this interferer!" commanded the thin man. "Kill the vampire!"

The shout was taken up again through the crowd. It was just reaching the point of crescendo when suddenly, in the wake of another booming sound, it died.

Cam Sanchez had moved to Thorka's side. A wisp of smoke crept from the barrel of the big Magnum which was pointed skyward. The hushed crowd now became alive with murmurs as those nearest the big Puerto Rican shrank back from his presence. The gun was only part of the reason, as was the man's bulk. It was the hard, chiseled features of the bullet-shaped head of the man, and the way the firelight danced and played with these features. . . .

"Demon . . . a devil!" men told each other.

The thin man with the bird-beak found it to his advantage to voice the thought more loudly:

"A devil? Aye, and why not? Is this not a black-souled vampire whom we send to his death? Why should not others who practice the black arts come to his aid? Well, we know how to handle perverted souls of their ilk!" His eyes narrowed as he directed his words to the two strangers. "Attempt to interfere, either of you, and you shall join this murderer in his cleansing by fire! Now to our business—kill this one!"

He had meant Nicholae, but his words were misunderstood by at least four burly villagers close to Cam and Thorka. In any event, it was four pairs of hands which rushed the Puerto Rican, grappling for both gun and man. One of the villagers was at least partially successful in his attempt to secure the pistol. The front of his face seemed to cave in as Cam shoved the barrel through a barrier of clenched teeth and halfway down his throat. Yanking it free, Cam's fist slammed the same barrel sideways across the nose-bridge of a second attacker. Number three caught an upthrust boot tip just under the ribcage, and the fourth man found himself half-airborne as Cam's

left hand sent him reeling toward the snapping fire. With a scream, the man rolled from the flames, his coat now a torch itself. For a brief moment the attention of the crowd was on their fellow townsman as the flaming garment was extinguished.

Then attention returned to Cam and the first three men he had subdued. One was out cold, a second sat slack-jawed, a dazed expression on his face, and the third was doubled over, coughing up a mixture of bloody insides. The giant himself stood as if relaxed, but every nerve-ending was at the ready for what might be coming.

The moment of quiet passed.

"You see!" cried the thin man. "What more proof is needed that this is a devil?" A finger pointed toward Cam. "Speak! Tell us who you are and what you are doing here?"

Thorka stepped forward. "This man is with me. He does not speak our language."

"Ah! More proof! For is it not written that the ungodly are doomed to speak in tongues not of man?"

"Be still with your foolishness!" Thorka snapped. "Where is someone of authority? Where are the police officials?"

The beak-faced man moved two steps closer. His voice now was shrill. "We are the authority here—the citizens of Arefu! We have taken the law into our own hands, to purge our village of the unclean. You, old man, are of the unclean! By your own words you condemn yourself. *This man is with me*, you say. This man, then, shall die with you and you with him and both of you with the vampire killer whose death you have tried to avert. Four men might your giant overpower, but we are more than four here tonight. *Get them, burn them!*"

At the screaming command, the circle around Thorka and Cam began to close. The Magnum hammer cocked.

Maybe, Cam was thinking, if he blew that parrot's nose off his face . . .

And then the circle stopped closing. For a moment Cam wondered why. Then he saw why.

She stood at the edge of the crowd, her eyes alternating from a pale green to a white-hot flash. He had seen the change in coloration several times now, and he knew what it meant.

"They will not move toward us," he told Thorka.

And, indeed, they did not. It was as if there had been dropped between the two men and the surrounding mob an invisible wall. No one could move closer to them.

"What manner of foul magic is this?" raved the thin man.

"An excellent question," Thorka murmured to Cam. "But I suppose this is an instance when that old saying applies. The one about not looking too closely into the mouth of a horse which is given you." He now directed his words to the rear of the crowd.

"One of you. Bring the police officials here at once." Of the thin man, he asked, "Where are they?"

"Locked in the jail, but—"

"Silence. You will have your chance to speak. You three—loosen your hold on that man." The three men holding Nicholae obeyed, not understanding why they did so. The youth, his face as wild as before but his body drained of all strength from his previous struggling, sagged down to his knees. As he did so, his eyes locked onto the thin leader of the crowd and remained on him.

The redfaced police official who pushed his way into the center of the circle was furious. His eyes also sought out the thin man, and his cutting words left little room for guessing whom he was addressing.

"You shall be hearing more about this business, Stefan. All of you here tonight shall be hearing more about this,

but you, Stefan—you especially will regret ever having subverted the peace of this village—”

“I?” Stefan cried. “I? It is not myself who is the vampire! It is not myself who killed three young people up on the mountain top! It is this Nicholae—him and his two accomplices from Hell who have come to save their cursed brother.”

“I am Alexandru Thorka of Bucharest,” the archaeologist said. “I and my friends drove up from the capital just tonight.”

“I thank God that you did,” the official said. “In the light of the day tomorrow, so shall the rest of my village. All of you,” he said, turning to the crowd, “all of you will be grateful that these men have stopped you from committing such a great crime.” And now again he faced the skeletal Stefan.

“And you—you who are no more than a hired innkeeper—you set yourself above law, above duly constituted authority. You fancy yourself a leader? You are scum!”

Stefan’s lips curled into an expression of disdain. “And you, what are you? The law, perhaps, but a mind corrupted by the evil which permeates this village, evil which it is my mission to cleanse from our homes. This man, this Nicholae, is a foul killer.”

Ignoring Stefan, the official addressed the crowd. “A most convenient charge, since Nicholae’s mind is so disordered that he cannot defend himself from it. Listen to me, all of you. You know full well that Nicholae could not have murdered Ilona and the young man from Valea Mare. You know full well that he was among the first to be suspected, but that he was with Mercea who swore to that fact.”

“True!” Stefan cried. “He had magicked Mercea into swearing such. The powers of the Darkness can accom-

plish such things, all of us know that. And we also know that it was Mercea himself who was the latest victim. Killed in the same way. Killed because the magic was losing its hold. Are we to believe that the murderer of that Stelian from Valea Mare, that strong youth, could not manage to murder this wastrel Nicholae?"

The heads which in the crowd had begun to nod stopped their nodding as Thorka stepped forward.

"Someone—or something—killed three people on that mountain top. Although my business here concerns other matters, I shall do what I can to ferret out the truth of the killings. But I shall do so by offering my assistance to what is duly constituted authority. Where does the rule of law ever stand, if it is subverted as all of you have tried to do this night?"

"Murderers!" Stefan snapped. "Murderers know no rule of law! He, Nicholae, was on that mountain. At night he was on that mountain—and no one who has been on that mountain at night has returned alive. He has."

"Yes," Thorka agreed. "Alive, but without much of his mind."

"Insane?" Stefan asked. "And why not? Why should not the mind crack under the weight of his foul sins? Do you wish proof? I have proof that what I say of Nicholae be truth. *Nicholae!* See if your mind can stand that which I hold before you!"

The eyes of the mad youth had been on Stefan since he'd been released. Wide as they were, they widened still more as the thin man reached inside his thick coat and brought out—

"*Yeeeeeeeeaaaaaauuuuuugh!*"

Nicholae's scream pierced the stillness of the night. His hands flew across his face to blot out the sight of something horrible.

Stefan threw up his own hands with glee.

"You see? Did you all see that? He cannot stand the sight of it—the cross! Not just any cross, mind you, *but the very cross which was found near the body of young Mercea on the mountain!*"

"Enough of this nonsense!" the police official commanded. "You three—you who were dragging this boy to a fiery death—take him back to his bed. And do it gently. The rest of you, go back to your homes and think about the shameful way you will be looking into each others' faces when daylight comes. *Move!*"

As the crowd began to disperse, the official took Thorka's hand.

"If you would, I'd like to talk to you at my office, sir."

Thorka nodded. "I have two men with me—foreigners—and a woman is supposed to be—ah, there she is!" Seemingly he had just noticed Ktara for the first time. She had not moved from the position where Cam had first spotted her, but her eyes were once again their normal pale green.

Thorka continued, "I would like to make sure our rooms are settled. We have made arrangements in Pitesti, and my friends have some equipment they wish to make sure is secure. But after that we shall return to your office."

"Good. In the meantime, I shall devote my attention to Stefan, who, it seems, has left with the others. I wish to ask him about that cross. It was not brought to my attention that such a piece of evidence existed. Ah, but in the meantime at least allow me to meet your friends."

The limousine and panel truck were parked side by side. As they approached the vehicles, the police official shook hands with Cam. Upon being introduced to Harmon, he said to Thorka, "I hope that these events do not give your guests the wrong impression of our village."

"I doubt that is likely," Harmon replied in Romanian.

"He speaks our language—bravo!" And now as Ktara approached the car, he asked Thorka: "You said the men were foreigners. Is the woman also not of this country?"

Thorka looked at Ktara, then at Harmon.

"That, sir, in an excellent question."

"Am I always to be surrounded by stupidity?"

Radu Conescu was not a tall man and the fact that his large head seemed connected to his shoulders without benefit of an intervening neck made him look shorter still. Adding to the effect was the bulk of his body, a thick bulk which consisted of rock-hard muscle. In body and in facial features—wide, thick lips, a flattened nose and dark bulging eyes—Radu Conescu looked much like the code-name he had worked under while serving British Intelligence. He was The Frog, even to a slightly greenish tint of his skin.

His deep voice spoke in Romanian, as did that of the woman who responded to his question. There were but the two of them in the man's spacious but dimly lighted room at the inn on the outskirts of Arefu.

"I will handle the matter," Dava said.

"You." His laugh was not pleasant. "You have handled things to such an extent that I have given some thought to strangling you. It would be an act of pleasure, I assure you, so do not tempt me. Your killing already has cost me much in time lost—and in wages. But we have discussed that before. No, you shall not *handle the matter* this time. I shall do so myself."

A brandy snifter crashed to the floor, thrown there by the woman who now stood haughtily above the seated man.

"I grow weary of your attitude! I have told you that

the first two had to die—they knew of the treasure! They were hunting for it!”

“Two lovers on a picnic, Dava! That is all they were, but even if they were more, what of it? Could two young people without tools find what we, with all our hired muscle, have not yet uncovered?”

“Not knowing where it might be, yes, it is possible for someone to blunder onto—”

“Blunder. An excellent choice of words, coming from yourself. But even if I grant you your argument, what of the other killing? Why did the girl’s brother have to die? Not that his life is all that important, but why did you have to supply these superstitious villagers with yet another reason to shun the mountain top?”

“Is it not shunning the mountain top which we desire?”

“At night, yes, you fool! But the legends themselves accomplish that. Your actions are causing the village men to fear treading there in the daylight as well. You, more than I, should know of these things. You are of Magyar blood, are you not?”

The woman’s thin lips smiled. “So it was my blood which attracted you? Perhaps, Radu, the villagers are right. Perhaps the vampire strain does lie in the Conescus. Perhaps by merely taking on the guise of blood relationship with the Count of Dracula Mountain we have tainted ourselves.”

Conescu’s face darkened. “You say that in mocking jest, but in your case, I wonder.”

“I am an actress, Radu. That is what you wanted, you said. Someone who could act the part. Well, I have done so. I have done so very well. So much so that sometimes . . . when I stand near the old castle ruins . . .”

“Or when you roam them at night, dressed like a wraith of Hell—”

Dava flared. “I cannot help that! It is as if the very

spirit of this place has entered me. A good actress, Radu—and I am a good actress—absorbs her part thoroughly. Perhaps I have absorbed too much, but—yes!—I do feel the power of the undead within me. It will pass once we get away from here, after we have the gold of Dracula in our hands. I have had to lose the influence of other roles before. It takes time, but I have always been successful.”

“So far,” Conescu said. “This role is one which you may not find that easy to shake off, considering the insane intensity with which you insist upon playing it. Yes, *insane*, Dava. Killing the first two was insane, as was your method. Killing this last one was insane, as was allowing the second youth to escape with his life.”

“But don’t you see, Radu? *He* is the one who is insane! He can tell no one anything. His mutterings—”

“His mutterings could at any time begin to make sense to those with the correct interpretation. That is why I arranged tonight for the job to be finished.”

The woman laughed. “Oh, yes. Such careful arrangements! We both saw, did we not, how well they were handled!”

The soft rapping stopped whatever it was Conescu was about to say. He nodded toward the door, and the woman crossed the room to it. Opening it only partly to see who was on the other side, she gave a short laugh and swung the door wide open.

The man entered the room nervously, his face pale with cold fright.

“You failed, Stefan,” Conescu said. “Come here to the front of me and explain how it was you failed to carry out my instructions. Was not my payment adequate?”

“S-sir, the strangers . . . they—”

“I saw them, I saw what they did. More important, I

saw what you did. You did badly, Stefan, and now you must pay for failing me."

Stefan now stood directly before the still-seated Conescu. "I—I will give you back your money."

"The money is not the important thing."

"Then I will slip quietly to the jail—where they are keeping Nicholae. I will complete the job."

"It is too late for that now, Stefan. However . . ."

Dava interrupted Conescu's train of thought. "Again, I offer to handle this matter."

Stefan turned his head wildly toward the woman. The door now was closed. She stood before it, a long dagger in her hand. His eyes once more on those of Conescu, he stammered, "Wh-what does she m-mean?"

The thick man rose, his huge hands gently patting Stefan's arms at their stringy biceps.

"You must forgive Dava's mode of expression. Her meaning is that she wishes to be assigned the task of disposing of you."

"Dis—"

"Disposing. You see, Stefan, your usefulness to me is over, but the police might find you useful. Your very mention of slipping quietly to the jail—"

"But, no—I did not mean—I will *not* go to the police!"

Radu Conescu laughed goodnaturedly. "On the contrary, Stefan—that is precisely what you *will* do."

His hands on Stefan's body tightened.

The police official was not happy.

"The boy Nicholae is dead. The strain of tonight was too much for someone in his condition. There is nothing he can tell us."

From his movements it was obvious that this was the signal for all of them to leave the room in the jail which had served as Nicholae's sick bay. Thorka and Cam

made ready to do so. Harmon also grasped the wheels of his chair, but as he turned again toward the boy's corpse, he exchanged a glance with Ktara.

"Sir, I wonder if my associate might remain here with the body. Just for a few moments."

"She has some special interest in the young man?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes. I assure you she will disturb nothing. She merely wishes to sit here quietly, if that is all right with you."

The redfaced man shrugged. "That presents no problem to me, not with all my other problems. This boy dead—and Stefan going into hiding. All the time you were over in Pitesti I have had men looking for him. He is nowhere to be found. Perhaps he has decided that he was wrong and is ashamed to face me—or anyone. That would not be surprising. With the entire village probably feeling shame, I would not be surprised if some of the men decided to take out their guilt upon him who almost led them to throw Nicholae to the flames. But I must find him. I must have information about that cross. A highly unusual incident that was, don't you think?"

They now all were seated in the outer office. The policeman had opened a bottle of cheap cognac and had poured four water tumblers full of the liquid for himself and the three men. Distributing them, he took a long sip from his glass, then sighed.

"Highly unusual," he repeated. "The way Nicholae reacted to it, I mean. Almost as if he *were* a vampire. . . . I am not a native of this village, gentlemen, but I have heard the stories nonetheless. Still, I do not know what to make of it all. Could it truly be possible that Nicholae was the victim of a vampire and, although not slain like the others, was tainted with vampire blood? Could that be possible?"

Thorka and Harmon now exchanged glances. It was the American professor who spoke:

"I would say the explanation is more mundane than that. Let us assume that there is no vampire in the case. That the murders were committed by some horrible means has, I think, substantiation in the way the bodies looked the next day when they were found. Assuming that this latest victim—"

"Mercea," the policeman supplied.

"Mercea, yes. Assuming he was killed in the same manner as the others, and assuming Nicholae was a witness to this, the horror of the event might easily explain his insanity."

"That is logical," the official agreed. "My own line of reasoning has suggested the same probability. But the cross—"

Thorka took it up. "The cross, according to Stefan, was found near the body of Nicholae's friend. If it was present during the murder, perhaps playing a vital part of the murder, the sight of it might well bring back all of the horror into his sick mind."

"As for the exact role of the cross," Harmon said, "it would be of help if we had it at hand."

"And," the policeman said, "if we had Stefan at hand." He finished his cognac and rose. "Well, those are my self-imposed assignments for tonight. If your assistant is finished in there—"

As if on cue, Ktara entered the room.

"Good," the large man said. "I will walk you to your car and bid you goodnight. For me, the night holds the promise of being a long one."

"Not as long as you might think," Thorka said from the side of the limousine. The rear door already had been opened. There, on the floor behind the front seat, lay

the crumpled body of Stefan the innkeeper. His neck and back were broken.

The wrought iron cross was also there. It was stuffed halfway down Stefan's throat.

CHAPTER 8

At the inn where Thorka had arranged rooms for them, they bid good night to the Romanian on the note of tomorrow being a busy day. Fifteen minutes later Cam wheeled the professor to Ktara's room. Avoiding looking at the huge crate in the center of the floor, Cam poured three snifters of cognac. It was of much better quality than that they had been served at the jail.

"The latent images were strong," Ktara began. "Those within the dead boy's mind and those within the body of Stefan, as well as the cross. The woman, Dava Conescu, is your mountaintop murderer, although her exact method does not come through. She would seem to be insane herself, at least judging by her treatment of Nicholae."

"You mean allowing him to live?" Cam asked.

"No. I mean forcing him to make physical love to her, in direct contact with the just-murdered body of his friend."

Harmon nodded. "A nice woman is Dava Conescu. And Stefan?"

"Snapped like a reed and strangled by Radu Conescu. His payment for a job poorly done."

The professor toyed with his glass. "It takes little imagination to come up with the nature of that job. This whole affair has taken on complications which I do not like. We had best move as swiftly as possible."

"Tonight?" Cam asked. His eyes were on the large crate.

"It is not advisable," Ktara replied to them both. "Not tonight—precisely because of the complications to which you refer. With yet another murder this evening, that of Stefan, the villagers must have time to assimilate our presence here, especially that of Dr. Thorka and Mr. Sanchez. Their first appearance was categorized as black spirits, and the men who surrounded the fire tonight will remember that full well when the news of Stefan's death is broadcast. However, when it is known that we are working to assist the village officials in solving these crimes, our acceptance will allow us to move about on a less restricted basis. In other words, we may accomplish what has to be done and then leave as we wish with few questions."

"All of which makes sense," Harmon said. "But all of which gives Conescu a view of us which we did not anticipate."

"Making necessary a change in our cover story?" Cam asked.

Harmon looked at Ktara then back at Cam. "No. No, I don't think so. It may not have the believability it might have had, but it's still the best way to get you on that mountain during the day. Suspect what he might, Conescu can't very well refuse the request. He's boxed in as far as that goes. No, I think we'll make no change in the cover. However, Cam, I would suggest you keep a very close watch on your own back."

"It is a strange request," Radu Conescu said speaking over the sound of five large gasoline-powered pneumatic drills. "This is not a typical archaeological dig, as you know."

The thick squat man stood near the ruins of the castle,

which even in the morning sunlight stood proudly as a beacon of something dark against the warmth of the day. The men from the village had ascended the mountain an hour previous. Because Harmon figured that Conescu might have some problems with his workers due to the activities of the past night, he advised Thorka and Cam that they should give the man at least an hour's time before handing him what no doubt would be an additional problem. That it did in fact present a problem, and an especially unwelcome one, was obvious from Conescu's reaction.

Thorka chose to ignore the reaction. He spoke in brusque Romanian:

"I am aware of the nature of your dig, Mr. Conescu, but we have little else happening within the immediate area. The young American is a friend of a friend, you see, and I am in my friend's debt for many favors. Quite frankly, I have little hope that the young man ever will become much of an archaeologist, but nonetheless I have said that I would what I could. So I humbly ask you for your cooperation in this matter."

Conescu hesitated. "I really do not know what you expect he might learn here, Dr. Thorka, therefore I am inclined—"

"If," Thorka interrupted, "I had to, I suppose I could arrange the entire matter with the authorities in Bucharest, those who issued you your permit to excavate. Naturally, I should not like to do so, but . . ."

Quickly: "But that will *not* be necessary, Dr. Thorka. Not at all. I do hope that the young man will not get himself in the way of our progress, however."

Thorka eyed him coolly. "Certainly that is not his intention, Mr. Conescu. Perhaps if you might show us around a bit, I can get on down the mountain. I have other guests with me, and I'm afraid I have not been the

most genial of hosts. That peculiar business last evening. . . .”

“Yes, wasn’t it? But such is the ingrained nature of superstition in villages such as these. You have no idea of the problems I’ve had in retaining any kind of work force. Just this morning, in fact—”

Thorka smiled. “But superstition is what you have come to fight, is it not? At least, one particular superstition.”

“Yes, of course. Which, although I shall do as you request, Doctor, brings me to my real reason for not wishing to have the young American on the mountain at this time. Last night, you see, he brawled with some of the village men.”

“Purely self-defense—and defense of myself as well, I might add.”

“I understand that, Doctor, but you heard what that innkeeper—Stefan, I believe his name was—you heard what he said. He said that the young man was in league with the dark spirits.”

“If I recall correctly, he said the same about me.”

“That is true, but none would suspect you of murdering Stefan.”

Thorka’s eyebrows rose. “Stefan . . . murdered?”

Conescu nodded. “Such is the rumor on the mountain this morning. Evidently the poor man was found with that cross thrust into his mouth. And his neck broken, too. It takes a strong man to do that.”

Thorka agreed. “Yet the village is filled with strong men, not excluding yourself, by the look of your physique, Mr. Conescu.” He did not say that it had been planned not to announce Stefan’s death immediately. Also he did not say that he was certain as to how the “rumor” got its start on the mountain this morning.

“In any case, Mr. Sanchez will endeavor to avoid trou-

ble, both to your work and to himself. Now, if you will be good enough to show us around—oh, you do speak English, I take it?”

The question, coming as suddenly as it did, took Conescu by surprise. Flashing through his mind were the various papers he'd signed in order to gain permission to excavate. Was there anything there about language ability? If there was, had he admitted knowing the tongue? In any case, what was he worried about?

“I speak some English,” he said in English to Cam. “Not very well, though.”

Cam took the hand extended to him. Not only in proportion to total body size, but in actual comparison hand-to-hand, it was larger than his own. “I guess I should apologize,” he said. “For imposing on you like this. But Dr. Thorka assured me that you wouldn't mind as long as I kept out of the way.”

“Mind? My dear boy, you are welcome to observe. I was just telling Dr. Thorka that. Come, let us see what progress has been made on this Mountain of Dracula.”

“Logic dictates where we dig, Mr. Sanchez.” Conescu waved toward the castle walls behind him. “Obviously an escape route from the fortress would be connected to some subterranean room beneath its main rooms. Ordinarily, the simplest thing to do would be to find that subterranean room and from there discover the passage to the tunnels.”

“I can see that,” Cam said. “But all your digging is outside the walls.” The five large drills were spaced in a semicircle heading downward toward the Arges, each about twenty yards from the nearest portion of wall. About each drill was a crew of six men and piles of rock which those who were not involved in actually operating

the machine were charged with taking from the hole it made.

"Why this arrangement?" he asked.

"Two very good reasons. Well, one good reason and one effective reason. The good reason is that the interior of the castle has collapsed to such an extent as to make the depths of the building difficult to get to."

Cam could see that. "But surely, difficult though it might be, it would be easier to clear out the rubble than to drill down into solid rock."

"Very correct. That is where the second reason comes in. The men, you see. They will not go inside the castle. If they would have done so before the unfortunate murders, they never would now. Regardless, I do not let these things stop me. My strategy, as you can see from my location of the drills, is quite simple. If the tunnels were to be used for escape, they would obviously head toward the river."

"Obviously?" Cam asked. "Why not into the mountains?"

"Because there is nothing in the mountains, Mr. Sanchez. From time immemorial, there has been nothing in those mountains except death from the elements. They cannot be crossed, not on foot—the condition we would expect of someone fleeing for his life through a tunnel system. Nor, during a siege, could one slip around and back to the river. No, the escape route would have to go down toward the east and come out somewhere near the river bank."

Cam looked down the mountainside toward the towering stone fingers, one of which particularly interested him—and would interest Conescu as well if he knew the significance of the huge round boulder resting against it. His eyes did not rest on the spot more than fleetingly,

moving to the thick evergreen forest beyond—and, beyond that, to the river.

"I would think," he said hesitantly, attempting to be the student Thorka had purported him to be, "I would think that it might be easier to look from the other end of the tunnel. There should be some sign, even now."

Conescu turned to Thorka. "You are right," he said in Romanian. "Your young friend probably will not make much of an archaeologist."

"I beg your pardon?" Cam said.

"I only said to the Doctor that we gave that consideration, but that the length of the shoreline could have us digging for years before we came to the correct place. Although the rock here is hard, we do have the advantage of knowing that, sooner or later, we must find the tunnel, if only we persevere."

Cam nodded. "Persevere is right. I hope that the prize is worth it."

He looked steadily at Conescu, whose gaze in turn was just as steady.

"What is more prized than one's family honor, Mr. Sanchez? That is why I dig."

Thorka cleared his throat. "The old values, Cameron. We still honor them in my country." He beamed at Conescu.

Conescu beamed back. He'd at least gotten on that old goat's good side. "Ah! My niece comes this way. Mr. Sanchez, she speaks excellent English, and I think she might have more free time than I to assist you. *Dava!*"

Cam had seen the woman far down the mountainside. Now as she returned her pseudo-uncle's handwave from just above the row of finger rocks, Thorka made his apologies.

"Cameron, I'll be leaving you now. The professor and

I have things to do. I am sure that you will be in good hands."

Shaking the hand of Conescu again, he started downward. Cam watched in silence as the old man trudged down the pathway the men had made in the snowscape, watched as he passed by the woman on her upward trek, watched too as he paused in his descent to look at her. There was an odd expression on his face, what appeared to be recognition but not quite that. After a moment or two, Cam realized that Thorka was not looking at the woman at all—not anymore. He was looking to the other side of her, at something moving along the crust of the snow. Something black. A cat, large for such an animal.

Cam smiled. As the woman drew closer, she evidently took his smile as intended for her. She returned it as Conescu made the introductions and told his niece what he expected of her. He then left to check the drills.

"Very happy to meet you, Mr. Sanchez. I'll gladly show you about the place, although I'm terribly afraid you'll be bored with what you see. Look around you. It's been the same, day after day for week upon week. The tedium grows upon me by the hour. Perhaps talking to you will restore my sense of being an intelligent creature."

She talked well. And, despite the lines of age—she was forty to forty-five, as Cam pegged it—she was a handsome woman. Thorka had been right about that. Her white skin flushed red from the cold, her face was that of a fine-boned aristocrat. Her body too was that of nobility. Even with the heavy coat she wore, her carriage, and the high-booted legs which moved freely under the coat, was evidence that she—

That she is a well-trained actress.

The words bounced hard within Cam's skull. He turned

to the black cat which trailed behind Dava. "Friend of yours?"

Dava smiled. "I've not yet decided. She attached herself to me earlier this morning. I have a way with animals, I suppose because I'm part animal myself."

"Are not we all?" Cam asked.

Her eyes looked him up and down. "I knew you would relieve the tedium. I just knew it."

She's not just talking about intellectual tedium, Mr. Sanchez.

Cam smiled back at Dava. *Gee, you have no idea how shocked and disheartened your intelligence makes me. A couple of thousand years old I am not, but I was not exactly born yesterday either, my good woman!*

As they walked from crew to crew, Cam noted that one young man, a tall blond Viking-looking husky, seemed to be watching them closely. Unless he missed his guess, the expression on his face was one of pure hatred. It was only when he and Dava joined that particular group that he was sure who the object of that hatred was.

Himself.

Was this one of the ones he'd tangled with last night? No, he was sure he wasn't. Maybe a relative? Possibly.

If you're interested . . .

The cat had followed them. *I'm interested.*

It's the way the woman is fawning over you. He, too, is interested—in her.

Ah, and she in him?

Mr. Sanchez. This is not an exercise in giving advice to the lovelorn. If you—

But the thought was not completed. It was broken off by a cry from the crew two drillers removed. Dava excitedly supplied the translation:

"No more rock—air! *We've broken through!*"

CHAPTER 9

The large public room at the Arefu inn was filled to capacity. A blowsy waitress winked at Cam as she filled his glass with cognac. She looked at Ktara with an admixture of jealousy and admiration as she filled the second glass. When she had gone, Ktara appeared absorbed in the din of voices from the bar and the nearby tables, then she glanced at Cam's glass.

"My suggestion is that you go a little easy on the cognac. Tonight is shaping up to be an event-filled night."

"I agree with both points made," the Puerto Rican said. He checked his watch. Eight o'clock. Another hour before he had to do his part, the part which would set things into motion.

Thorka had not been present when Cam and Ktara had reported the events of the morning to Harmon, so they could speak freely. Freely and firmly, Harmon made his decision and laid their plans.

"It must be tonight. Finding the entrance to the tunnels is not the same as finding the gold, but now it is only a matter of time. Cam, perhaps you should not have come down. Ktara could have told me all I needed to know."

Cam had shrugged. "No choice. Conescu evidently had an agreement with his workers. Full day off on the day they hit paydirt. Day off and free drinks at the inn until

sundown. As for myself, he was clear about not wanting me around. Tomorrow, maybe, he said. He also said that he would explain things to Dr. Thorka."

Harmon considered. "Clever of the man. How large was the hole—large enough for entry?"

"A little chip here and a couple more there, and it would be, yes."

Harmon looked to Ktara. "And its location? Can the place where the gold is located be reached easily from the point of breakthrough?"

"It will not be all that difficult to find, once they are inside the tunnels."

"Very clever," Harmon said. "Get rid of all the men for the rest of the day and he's got all those daylight hours, plus the night, of course, to hunt for his prize."

"I could go back up," Cam said tentatively.

"No. Conescu is no fool. He won't try to move the gold down the mountain during the day. He'll wait until dark."

"If they find it today—and can get at it," Ktara said. "As to that, we can easily know."

Harmon understood. "Very well. A black cat will not be regarded as much of a threat to them."

Ktara had left shortly after the plan had been finalized. The plan for tonight.

Sipping his cognac, Cam again checked his watch. Eight five. At nine sharp he was to go upstairs to where Conescu had his rooms. If the man was there, Cam's job was simply to inform him that he'd seen some lights from the mountain top and had wondered whether or not he'd authorized any work up there.

That would draw Conescu to the castle.

And to him who would be waiting.

A very simple plot, a very simple responsibility for Cam—one which might be totally unnecessary in that

Conescu and his so-called niece might not be down from the mountain by nine. They still were there when Ktara descended at seven. And yet he agreed with Ktara. The night indeed promised to be event-filled, and he somehow seriously doubted that he would be getting off as lightly as his assigned role appeared to dictate. Somehow . . .

To deliver his simple message, then to watch.

Then to contact Harmon via the pocket communicator he carried, saying only that "All is ready," the terseness of the message being due to the fact that Harmon and Thorka would be with the police official at his office to make sure *he* didn't decide to wander up onto the mountain.

And then to do nothing, just sitting quietly drinking cognac while Harmon mentally withdrew the sliver from the heart of the Count, to release the vampire to deal in his own way with those who would have his gold. . . .

"You're right, Mr. Sanchez," Ktara said softly. "Things rarely work as simply as they are planned. I think perhaps that Conescu's plan may have gone a bit awry as well."

"Such is our intention, I believe."

"Yes, but irrespective of ourselves, he has made a mistake. Look around you. What do you see?"

Cam looked. And listened as well, because the pitch of the voices had gotten somewhat louder. And surlier. "Men who've had a little too much to drink."

Ktara half-smiled. "As was of course Conescu's plan. But what he did not take account of was that these men, when they'd had a little too much to drink, might do some thinking, might do some talking, the content of which would be boosted by the alcohol he has provided them. *Surly* was the word your mind used when describing the attitude of this group of men. Did it not strike you that

the same word could be used to describe the group of men who surrounded that fire last evening?"

"Go on," he said.

"These men are afraid. The breakthrough this morning causes their fear. What lies inside that tunnel? That is what they ask themselves. What really lies down there—that has lain undisturbed for almost a century, that they have opened up? You, above all outsiders, should understand what is going through their minds and hearts, Mr. Sanchez."

And suddenly he did. Vividly he recalled his own feelings when he saw that other opening into the tunnels, knowing the contents of scores of legends about what presumably lay within.

"Tonight," Ktara said, "tonight there is more talk of vampires, of the real purpose of Conescu and his niece, of ridding the village of them and their kind. At the present, it is just a minority of voices which espouse this cause, yet I fear that if the drinking goes on very much longer—"

She halted her speech as her eyes and Cam's were drawn to the bar. It was an obvious disagreement between the men, one in particular appearing to hold a lone opinion. Suddenly, Cam didn't know exactly how, he could understand the exchange in Romanian. Turning swiftly to Ktara, he saw her nod and her command to listen.

It was the Nordic-looking young man who had viewed Cam with such hatred that morning. His face was red, and he was adamant in trying to refute the opinion of the man next to him:

"What you say is ridiculous! They are nothing but scientists, whom you do not understand because of your own rude habits! They are also of the noble blood—"

"Aye, blood!" a man at the bar broke in. "Blood!

They and their kind should know much about that. Milhail, you know not of what you speak!"

"And I say it is you who know not of what you speak," the tall Viking named Milhail countered. The lines of his face loosened and he smiled. "In any case, I have not the time to waste arguing with such as you. I must be off."

"Off?" a comrade asked. "Why off? The undead Conescu has bought our drinks in daylight. Come, let me buy you one for the night."

Milhail shook off the arm that had gone around him. "I thank you for the offer," he said good-naturedly, "but, really, I must go. Unlike you who have nothing better to do but swill the devil's brew, I have business to attend to."

Several jeering laughs. "Business is it? Perhaps it is a little something like a girl you've got to get to—is that right, Milhail?"

"Perhaps," said another, "it is a special woman. Such as that niece of the fiend we've been discussing. Don't deny it, I've seen the way you've looked at her up on that mountain!"

"And the way she's looked at you!" another laughed.

"Could our young friend Milhail also be a vampire?" someone suggested. And there was laughter all around, to the red blush on the young Viking's face.

Cam whispered to Ktara, "At least some of the surliness has been relieved."

"For the present. However, they are right."

"He does have—an appointment with Dava?"

"So say his thoughts, yes. She, for one, intends to be on that mountain tonight, at least, according to what she has told this young man."

Milhail, from his place at the bar, laughed. "A vampire, am I? Then I should not be able to do *this*, should I?" Reaching behind the bar he withdrew something and placed it around his neck. It was a string of garlic.

"That is no joke, Milhail," an elderly man said in the silence that followed the young man's action. "I suggest you keep that around your neck—if in truth it is the Conescu woman you have dealings with tonight."

"It might get cumbersome, old man!" Milhail replied, but as he began to lift it from him, the other man grasped his wrist.

"I beg of you, leave it! It may save you from the fate you so freely wish to rush to."

Cam suddenly stood. "Somebody's got to stop him!" he said under his breath. "But I have no command of the language."

Ktara smiled. "It appears you do not need it. You have gained the young Milhail's attention. His full attention, it would seem."

She was dead right. Milhail had spotted Cam as soon as he'd stood. The Viking's eyes narrowed, again evidencing the hatred he'd shown Cam earlier. The right corner of his mouth extended downward into a sneer as his hand shot out with an index finger arrow-aimed at the Puerto Rican.

"Vampire, you say?" he asked his fellow villagers. "One who is of the dark and evil supernatural? Consider that one! You all saw, last night, what he did with his magic. Four of our friends did he subdue—four of them. Yes, he is big, but look at his eyes—look at his face. Have the powers of blackness ever presented themselves so starkly? Why does he come here, drinking, listening to all of us, when it has been claimed that he does not speak our tongue? If you seek a dark agent, my friends, I suggest that you seek no further."

"What now?" Cam said to Ktara.

"I think you have an accurate idea," she said.

He nodded. Things rarely worked as simply as planned.

There were a few brusque shouts, countered by a plaintive plea for sanity by the man behind the bar, in the middle of which plea a full pitcher of beer sailed past Cam's ear. Before the glass had shattered upon the wall behind him, the missile attack was followed up, but not with missiles.

The two men were of substantial size, but both had been drinking heavily as evidenced by the way they shuffled to the battle front and the way their faces reacted in slobbering pride to the cheering section the entire inn had become.

Ktara moved from the table rapidly. "I'd love to help, but that would serve only to confirm their suspicions."

Cam nodded. He understood. He didn't like it much, but he understood. Placing his weight upon his right foot which he swung to the rear of his left, he pushed both hands forward, fingers open, wrists bent upward. In this semi-cat stance he was ready to deal out his worst. He hoped he wouldn't have to.

He didn't, not the first defense, anyway.

They both rushed him at once, close together, as if trying to smother him in their attack. Shifting his weight forward and pivoting his forward foot simultaneously, Cam swung his right foot far around in a close-to-the-floor backward crescent. The *aikido* move brought him out of the way of both men who, realizing their target had whirled from view, jerked to a halt and swung to again face him. They had made it a quarter of the way when Cam thrust a flat-palmed hand to the shoulder blade of the nearest. Off balance as both men were, the powerful jolt, when transmitted from one man to the next, drove both of them five feet from impact point—where they themselves impacted with a table and three chairs, only one of which broke.

One of the men staggered to his feet, grinned stupidly and fell down.

The second man smiled, hiccoughed, but stayed where he was, half under the table.

Behind you!

The big right fist now shooting toward Cam was taken easily, right hand on right wrist, closing and dropping wrist and fist floorward. The floorward motion stopped abruptly as the face of the man, young and wiry, collided with Cam's right knee. His eyes rolled up into his head as he slumped unconscious to the wooden floor.

Cam needed no warning to prepare himself for the next onslaught—three of them, coming in like the points of a perfect triangle. Three of them, big, and not as drunk as the others.

He'd wanted to be nice, but it looked like they weren't going to let him.

"Hiiii—aaahh!" he shouted, leaping with both booted feet and placing one smack into the forehead of the man who had been coming right-front. As he faded into the background, his arms shooting toward the ceiling, Cam crescent-kicked into the right knee of the tough who had been rushing from the left. A cry of pain accompanied the separation of kneebones as the attacker crumpled face first to the floor.

Cam whirled to meet the third man.

He had backed off, but only for a moment. There was a crash of glass, and the heavy was back.

With a broken jagged-edged bottle in his hand.

The room was as quiet as death.

"I kill you!" the man shouted in Romanian. But Cam didn't need Ktara's translation-assistance to get the message. The face of the man and the way he held the bottle were quite enough.

Cam stepped back one pace, then another. *Come on, bottle man, step into the spider web!*

The man came—one pace, another. *One more, just one more and you've had it!*

"No!"

The man with the bottle froze, one half-step away from his death. Warily Cam searched for the owner of the deep, booming voice. He did not have to search far.

He was big, as big as Cam in height, and bigger in shoulder-breadth and chest-expanse. He looked to be about forty. His hands were strong as were his facial features. Except for the extreme squareness of the jaw, his height and trim waist and the thick thatch of unruly blond hair made him look like the Viking's older brother.

"No," he repeated. "We do not like fights in which one man is weaponed and another not. Put the bottle away."

The man with the bottle sneered. "This is none of your affair, Orgo. You do not meddle with common village affairs. You did not climb the mountain with us every day. You did nothing to prevent this American from harming four of our friends last night—nor did you do anything to prevent the murder of Stefan. You sit in your home and play with your chisels and stone sculptures. Go, sit in your home now and leave us be. This man is going to die."

The giant called Orgo smiled. "Perhaps he will die, perhaps he will die this night. But it will not be because you have stabbed him with jagged glass. Put it down."

There was a silence during which the distance between the two Romanians was closed. In four quick strides the big blond man was at the other's side.

"Put it down."

"Orgo, I warn you—"

"And I warn you." The larger man's thick fingers

grasped the wrist of the hand which held the bottle. "I warn you—this one time only—that if you do not drop the bottle at once I will pull your arm from your shoulder. Do you understand me?"

The man with the bottle was no small package of flesh, but his eyes widened at the threat of Orgo. The giant himself had not raised his voice, but there was an iron quality about it which conveyed to everyone in the room that he was not joking.

The bottle shattered on the floor.

Orgo released his grip. "Now, go and get yourself a beer. I will conduct whatever further business with this American which remains to be conducted."

The other did as ordered. Orgo looked at Cam with amused eyes.

"Do you understand my tongue—or would you rather I speak yours?" he asked in Romanian.

"Yours is not one of my better languages," Cam said.

Orgo laughed. Then, in English: "Very well. I am not overly certain I want these people to understand our conversation anyway. Besides, it has been some time since I've spoken English. It is also some time since I've seen someone with your fighting skill."

Cam accepted the compliment with a nod. "Thank you as well for doing what you did just now."

"You pretend that I assisted you? Not at all. I just didn't want you to have a dead villager on your hands. Tell me, where did you learn your unarmed combat?"

"Some with the New York City police. Most of it on my own."

Again Orgo laughed. "You Americans. So very big on—how you say it?—do-it-yourselfing? As for me, I learned most of what I know from well-trained instructors in Moscow."

"You're Russian?"

"Not at all. My physique earned me the privilege of traveling to Mother Russia on what you might call a scholarship. I wanted only to sculpt, but the government had other ideas. In any event, that is not important. What is important is that I would like to test my ability against a worthy opponent. It has been a long time since I have encountered one I would call worthy."

Cam's face tensed. "Me, you mean."

Orgo took off his jacket. Under it was a white turtle-necked sweater. "You."

"Now?"

"Now. I trust you are ready. If so, we begin."

Orgo half-turned his body as if to say something to someone else. That wasn't the purpose of the turn. The purpose was a coil-up of power which, when unleashed, sent two boots flying in the direction of Cam's head.

Cam executed a perfect *aikido* side-step, realizing almost too late that this was precisely what Orgo had predicted he'd do. Almost. He blocked the fist to his left temple with a forearm that just barely made it in time, following it up with a jerk to the left of his head which rewarded him with nothing more damaging than the breeze of Orgo's left fist thrust. Three shots, three misses, for Orgo. Cam's open right palm launched upward for Orgo's jaw.

One shot, one miss, for Cam.

The two separated simultaneously.

"You *are* good," Orgo said, smiling.

Cam grinned back. *So are you, buddy, but this is no mutual admiration society*, he thought. What he said was, "In which case, maybe you'd like to stop all this and have a beer?"

Orgo laughed and stepped in quickly, a cross-over step which ended in a toe-point aimed at Cam's gut. It didn't make it, Cam seeing the move before it left launch pad

and countering it with a shin-block to the side. Unfortunately, his follow-up was as unsuccessful as Orgo's attack, his knife-hand chop to the eyes wedging into a cross-wrist X-block which snapped up swiftly to block his palm six inches from target. Quickly Orgo's hands dropped, then shot forward toward Cam's stomach. The Puerto Rican jumped backward, causing Orgo's two-fisted thrust to fall short, but also causing a leaning-forward momentary imbalance upon his own part. If the Romanian were fast . . .

He was. A fast step toward Cam, and a fast boot sole to Cam's chest. The driving power was tremendous, Cam reflected with a wince, as his back crashed into a tabletop fifteen feet from point of foot-to-chest impact. Under the strain of the back-to-table impact, the table legs gave way, thus there followed a crashing table-to-floor impact.

But Cam wasn't part of that crash. "*Hyyy!*" he roared as, twisting his legs upward, he wrapped them around the neck of Orgo, whose rush had been fast, but this time not quite fast enough. Allowing the Romanian to maintain his momentum, Cam thrust his force downward. There was another crash, Orgo's face on the bottom. Releasing his leg hold, Cam shot to his feet. Orgo did likewise.

The two men faced each other, cold menace in their expressions. Neither moved for one, two heartbeats, three, four.

Then Orgo's bloodied face relaxed as did his body. He laughed out loud. "As I said, you are good!"

Cam held to his stance, but allowed his eyes to quickly scan the rest of the room. No one else was moving. All were waiting for Orgo. On his part, Orgo extended a thick right hand to Cam.

"Come, it is over. Do you not think I know you could

have broken my neck if you so chose? In that you did not so choose, the least I can do is buy you something to drink. Come!"

Still wary, Cam accepted the firm hand of the man. He also accepted the hearty but friendly clap on the shoulder from Orgo's left palm. As they stepped to the bar, men moved awkwardly to make a place, their eyes still filled with wonder. "I must explain to them," Orgo told Cam, then addressed the crowd in his own tongue:

"A vampire, you call this man? Hardly! He needs no wiles of darkness to subdue those who would attack his person. He is a very skilled fighter—more skilled even than I. And thus I salute this American, and it is my intention to buy him a beer, if I may have a bit of service, please!"

With another deep laugh and another clap on Cam's shoulder, Orgo shouted in Romanian, "If I am too old to fight, I am not too old to drink, hey?"

The answering laughter from around the bar was forced, the men still not sure what to make of the young American. But for the moment there was no more talk of vampires.

"There will be, however," Ktara said from behind Cam.

Orgo's face brightened in appreciation. "Lovely," he said to Cam. "If you do not mind my saying—and if *you* do not mind, my lady," he added to Ktara. "I assure you, I mean it as a sculptor, a teller of tales in stone—and as a man as well."

Ktara smiled. "Who would mind such a compliment? I thank you."

Her smile and manner suddenly reminded Cam of Dava, and of the young Viking who—

Who was nowhere to be seen.

His eyes locked with Ktara's.

He wanted you dead, her message said. His fate is his just reward.

"I've got to go," Cam told Orgo.

"Go?"

Ktara took Cam's wrist, his left one. She looked down at his watch. Nine. "There is no need." *Conescu is not in his quarters. As for the blond young man, I have said what I have said.*

"Do not go, please," Orgo urged. "You have had nothing to drink!"

You'd best do as he suggests. The mood of this crowd is such that it would take little to send them up the mountain. Your departure, especially if it were seen that you were going up, might be the very thing that could spark them. We do not want that.

You're right. "Excuse me," Cam said to Orgo.

"You insist on going?"

Cam smiled. "Only to the men's room, if you will point the way."

The way was pointed. Once behind the closed door, Cam quickly pushed a small button on the hand-sized communicator. He waited for close to ten seconds before the voice came: "Harmon. You can speak freely."

"There is no one in Conescu's room, or so Ktara says."

"Then we must assume they are where we want them. I will release—"

"No—not yet. There is someone else up there, some poor innocent fool." He reviewed the situation quickly.

Harmon did not respond immediately. "I think—I think that I and Alex and the police might come to the inn for a drink. Ktara is right, Cam. If you leave abruptly, the mood could change. If it does, I want any rash action checked."

"And the Count—you'll keep him where he is for the present?"

"He can go nowhere until I release him, Cam. But I cannot wait too long." A pause. "You feel you must go up there tonight?"

"Yes sir."

The conversation completed, Cam returned to the bar. Ktara's eyes were bright.

You sometimes amaze me with your ethics, Mr. Sanchez. This man Milhail wanted you out of the way because he saw you as a rival for the woman. Now he has his wish, in that he goes to the woman. Why should you not let him have what he wishes?

Cam's eyes narrowed as he returned Ktara's stare. His message was vocal, not mental, in that he wanted to feel his words roll across his tongue.

"Long ago, very long ago, in a land far from here someone we both know quite well wanted something—something whose consequences he did not fully understand. Don't you sometimes wish that someone—anyone—had interfered then, so that his wish had not been fulfilled?"

Orgo looked puzzled. "A profound bit of something or other, I'm sure, my friend. But drink your drink, American lad. And you, Miss, may I order you something that will dry your eyes?"

Cam had been looking at Orgo. He now returned his focus to Ktara. Her eyes. Not tears, not full tears—but there was a wetness there which had not been present before. It was something new, as was her use of cursing in the mental thought that slammed into his skull:

You will be too late, damn you. And, damn you, I am glad!

CHAPTER 10

Milhail shuddered at the howl of the wolf. It sounded much too close to the stone castle, by which he stood. But he could not see it anywhere in the moonbathed expanse of mountainscape that lay before him. It was just that the night was so still, so strangely quiet. Except for his own heavy breathing—and now and then, the wolves.

He felt strange himself. Odd. What on earth was he doing here? Was this not the Mountain of Dracula? Did he not know the legends of this place? Was he crazy? To come up day after day, working for Conescu's high wages to run the drill, that was one thing. But to come in the dark hours, to *dare* to come when the sun had fallen. . . .

Ilona and that fellow Stelian. They had dared. Mercea and Nicholae also had dared. All were now dead. Those who said that Nicholae had been responsible for the killings were wrong, they had to be. That Stelian could have broken Nicholae's back with his thumb and forefinger. Instead, Stelian had fallen under the killer's—

What? The killer's *what*? Knife? Perhaps—or maybe a bottle. A jagged bottle like that which was to be used against the American tonight.

The American. Ha! Orgo would take care of him. Orgo the sculptor, Orgo with the hands of three normal men. He would do it—in fact by now would have done it,

made mush of the proud American's face. Orgo the strong, the strange. . . .

Orgo. Orgo the killer?

Those hands of his, that strength. The report was that Stefan had died with his back broken. Orgo could easily do such a thing. But why would he want to? All the man ever cared about was his chipping of stone. Or so it seemed. Perhaps the police might be interested in this theory. If Orgo could not account for himself at the time of the killings . . .

Where is she? Dava—where is she? She said that she would meet me here. What was *that*? Another wolf, that is all. Keep calm, Milhail. There is no reason to fear. Orgo has his hands full right now, and even if he had not . . .

Milhail wondered briefly if he could take the other man in a fight. He knew his strength was probably equal to that of the older man, but as to skill . . . he didn't know. He had seen Orgo fight once, and the way he handled himself was frightening; the opponent was out cold before anyone knew exactly what it was Orgo had done. Much like the way that American fought last night—and tonight—when he was attacked. Milhail probably could not defeat the American, but Orgo surely could. Therefore, Milhail could not defeat Orgo.

A chill went down the young man's spine. If such were the case, what if the killer was Orgo? What if he—for some reason of his own—did not want anyone up on this mountain during the dark?

Where is Dava?

And then he saw her—at least, it was a woman's form which was coming from the rocks of the castle to his left. But the woman wore only a light white gown, a nightdress it appeared to be. In this cold . . .

Unless she didn't *feel* the cold! Unless she was some-

thing other than a normal human being. Lord! Could *she* possibly—?

This time the wolf howl sounded much, much closer. And there, behind the rocks—something else, something white like the dress of the woman—but it disappeared as quickly as it had appeared. But it was the woman now who drew his eyes to herself. Stately she was as she walked toward him, holding herself erect as with a half-smile she greeted his presence. Her skin appeared in the moonlight as if blue-green, her thin frame seeming to carry nothing of life as an outer wrapping. Her feet, naked to the cold as if they had no feeling, moved through the broken crusts of snow with unhurried steps, much as if it were summer and they were caressing the softness of a field of white flowers.

All about her was the aura of death, or of the dead, except for the unnatural redness of her lips. Even the placidness of her facial features was corpselike, the half-smile which curled the upper lip strangely, the eyes which stared straight into his. Could it possibly be that this woman, who was an admitted blood relation to the past owner of the castle—?

Milhail realized he was backing away from the woman when she spoke to him:

“You are somewhat early, Milhail. I hope you have not been waiting long.”

He exhaled audibly, his voice unsure of itself. “Dava? It is you, is it not?”

She laughed, low in her throat, extending her hands to him. Taking them in his, it was as if he had accepted two implements fashioned from solid ice. “Dava—you must be freezing!”

“Perhaps,” she said speculatively, “you would like to warm me?”

"I—that is why I have come. To express my love for you and—"

Her eyes flashed. The smile was gone. "Don't be stupid! I have need for your body and its strength. That is all."

"But I thought—"

"Of course that is what you thought, but it is what I think that matters. Do you have a flashlight?"

He wanted to back away, to run from this place as fast as his legs would take him. But he could not. Proud as he was of himself, his village-born nature was humbling itself before aristocracy. She would command, and he would obey. There was no doubt in the woman's attitude that such would be the relationship. There was no doubt in his own mind that he would submit. He brought the flashlight from within his jacket.

"Very good, Milhail. Follow me. We go down into the tunnel."

Switching on the light, he followed trancelike as the woman led him to the place the drill had broken through that morning. The hole had been widened to the extent that a man of his size could squeeze through.

"You descend first, so that you can assist me," Dava said coldly.

It was a command, one which neither of them questioned he would obey. Turning the beam of the flashlight down into the hole, he could see the thick rock from which the opening had been hewn and, some ten feet below, the stone floor. Sitting on the edge of the hole, he dangled his feet downward. Then, using his hands to keep his descent slow and controlled, he lowered himself into the tunnel, releasing his grip on the surface to drop the remaining couple of feet to the tunnel flooring.

Immediately after his boots touched bottom, the physical reaction to the place set in. The tunnel walls

were lighted dimly, the source of the light being a fire-brand placed in an ancient-looking holder attached to the wall in the far distance. The space itself, from wall to wall, from floor to ceiling, was cramped, the tunnel having been constructed in bygone days when the stature of man was smaller than today's norm. The long, low, tight quarters seemed to close in on Milhail with claustrophobic suddenness. Beads of sweat burst out on his forehead.

It was not just the spatial reality which affected him, not only the way the flickering torch threw terrifying demon-teeth at and around him. The very air itself, air which he could taste as well as smell, was fetid, a dank atmosphere which might belong on some other planet where foul inhabitants breathed a very different mixture of elements from the human species. A putrid combination of decayed elements not meant to be exposed to the light of the sun which warmed and cleansed the earth.

"Assist me," came the command from above.

Milhail's arms trembled, yet they reached upward to grasp the cold blue flesh of the woman's legs. As he lowered her to the floor, he saw with surprise that, against the wall directly opposite to where he stood, there was a wooden ladder. A ladder which was positioned so that its top could have been reached from above and used for descent. Why had she not used it?

The woman evidently saw the question in his face. "Ladders are fine when one is alone, Milhail, but I wanted your hands upon my body. Is that wrong of me?"

Her tone was seductive now, although the imperiousness was fully present.

"N-no, it is not wrong," he answered, but he was thinking of other possible reasons why she had said nothing of the ladder. She might have wanted to insure that he would come down first. She might have hoped he wouldn't

see the ladder at all, so that he would not know how he might get up and away from her if he so wished. *If* he wished? God, how he wished! If only he had not come here tonight; if only he had stayed in the warmth of the inn!

"Come," she said. "The place we want is down toward the torch."

Again, she waited for him to move first, and he docilely obeyed. The torch was a fair distance from where they had come down, and its light not all that adequate to see by, but when he trained his flashlight upon the floor ahead it seemed to make little difference. It was as if the walls and floors, and the very air about them, were somehow absorbing the light. Absorbing it and consuming it, as if the tunnel were not carved in rock but in a sickly moss-overgrown sponge which even now was waiting to absorb the perspiration from his brow and his back and take its life-sustaining substance into itself, much like—

Like a vampire absorbing blood!

"What was *that*?" His head whirled around to the sound. It had come from the direction of the opening, a kind of soft thumping. He could, however, see nothing.

"What is the matter, Milhail?"

"I heard—I think I heard—"

She smiled. "I heard nothing unusual. Kindly hurry."

But her eyes lied. No, they did not lie, exactly. It was more as if they betrayed that her words were lying, as if they were telling him that there was no reason for him not to know she was not telling the truth, that it made no difference to the woman—or to him—if what she said were accepted or not. Very simply, he knew he had absolutely no choice but to do what she told him, and for now that meant he must turn his back on her and on whatever might be behind them and walk to the torch,

the flickering flames of which were like long-taloned fingers, beckoning to him to come within their reach.

"Are you afraid, Milhail?" the woman asked softly.

He opened his mouth to answer, but could not. He, Milhail, afraid? Afraid of what? Had not he told the others at the inn? They are *scientists*, that is all. Had he not spoken of the other men's stupidity which did not allow their minds to think on levels above that of ancient and foolish superstition? And was not his body strong, stronger by far than that of this woman who—

"You should be afraid, you know," she said.

He did not turn around, but instead quickened his pace. Somehow he *could* not turn around.

"Very much afraid," she went on, her tone level and foreboding. "You are on Dracula Mountain at night. You are within the bowels of that mountain which, at one end, is connected with the depths of the castle itself. Within those depths, in time past, men screamed, women who were fettered in chains cried in agony while pleading for the final bliss of death. And somewhere, perhaps beneath the castle or within these tunnels, it is said that the body of the old Count lies, not alive but not dead. Do you not fear for your very soul?"

"I—" Milhail began. "You do not believe those s-stories. That is why you and your uncle came here, to disprove them."

The woman laughed. "You will see in a moment why we came here. Stop. We have reached the door."

He had seen it, set into the rock wall to his left, opposite the burning firebrand. As a dark slit it first appeared, then widening as they drew closer. Now the thick oak of the wood was apparent, as was the rotted condition of the door at its edges. But the barrier was intact, as was the dried wax seal of purple, the size of a human fist, which was placed half-and-half upon the side of the door

opposite the two large metal hinges and the oaken upright which formed part of the door frame. It was a simple design, that seal, a simple circle in the center of which was a Gothic text *D*. From its appearance it had been swept clean of the dust of decades, but its dried-blood color, horrible as it was, did not affect Milhail half as much as the small metal plaque next to it.

The metal, again brushed free of dust, was gold. In the same script as the *D* of the seal a short message had been etched into the plaque's surface. The language, although stilted and old-fashioned, was Milhail's own:

Break not the seal, open not the door,

Enter not within my room.

Else you this very night shall find,

Within, your night of doom.

Under the four lines was etched another Gothic *D*.

"Dramatic language, is it not?" Dava asked from behind Milhail. "Is not the curse of Dracula enough to make even you afraid?"

"Wh-why should I fear the curse?"

"Because you are going to break the seal and open the door. That is why."

"I—I am to break the seal?"

"The door is heavy, the latch strong. I cannot do it. That is one of the reasons I asked you here tonight, to assist me. And that is what you will do, my Milhail."

The young man backed away from the door, then felt the heat of the torch behind him. "No. I—why does not your uncle do this? He is strong enough!"

"Strong enough in body, but not in mental resolution. Not like you, my Milhail. You, after all, are not afraid, even though there are many things one could imagine to be afraid of. Just what doom is it which the Count promises will come to the one who enters the room? Think

on it, Milhail. In the Count's days, and in times beyond that, there were very special ways to protect a locked door. As it was pushed open, for example, a trigger mechanism might be set off which might put into motion a variety of devices. Such as a vase filled with acid which might overturn on anyone passing underneath. Or a set crossbow which might send a poisoned arrow into the intruder's chest. Or a release-catch from above that would free a massive weight which would crush its victim. Or the same kind of catch which would free a weighted arm which, in turn, would swing down toward the door. The end of the arm could be a heavy mace—or it could be two sharp spines arranged so as to gouge out the eyes of him who—”

“Stop it!” Milhail pleaded.

The woman smiled. “But you asked why Radu Co-nescu does not do this chore, and I am explaining.” She looked toward the door. “Of course, not all of the methods are mechanical. A variety of poisonous animals, mostly snakes, often were—”

“I said to stop it—*stop it!*”

“Very well. In any case, it is time for you to go to work. Now that you are aware of the potential dangers, I am certain you will take the proper care.”

“N-no . . . I cannot. . . .” And now Milhail was backing away from the woman, moving from the flickering torchlight into the beginnings of darkness which waited beyond.

“Do not be a fool, Milhail!” Dava snapped. “There is no exit that way. The only way out is the way we entered. To reach there you will have to pass by me. Strong you may be, but that will not happen unless I will it to happen. Listen. Do you hear anything—anything other than your own quickened breathing?”

Milhail stopped and listened. There did seem to be

something . . . something up near the entrance hole. Something—but what?

“Come, Milhail. Come back to the door of your future. There is wealth beyond it, much wealth. You can share in it for doing your part. All you need do is to open the door.”

“*The door to my doom!*” Milhail screamed at her. “That is what Count Dracula says!”

“Says?” she repeated. “Count Dracula *says*? Dear Milhail, the Count has long been dead. He cannot harm you now—but I can and will unless you cease your foolishness! I will be your doom! *Do you understand me?*”

Her voice did not shout, but the weight of her words gripped the young man by his innards. In the numbness which was coming over him, he managed to nod his head. His feet somehow moved him back before the door.

“Break down the door,” Dava commanded. “It is weak and rotted with age. It will fall before your force—easily.”

Milhail stepped back and closed his eyes. With a silent prayer moving through his mind, he brought up his heavy boot and slammed it against the oak—just over the golden plate of warning.

The crash was not so much a crash as a tired sigh. The wood of the door had almost completely rotted through. Milhail’s leg went through it past the middle of his right shin. It felt almost as if something on the other side had clutched it.

He yanked it back to himself with a cry, his eyes snapping open.

And then it was Dava who cried—a cry of delight.

“Look, you dolt! Look where the light of the torch enters the room through the hole you made. Look, Milhail, *at all of that gold!*”

It was . . . beautiful. And so much. Even through the broken barrier of the old door, he could see that. Gold, so much gold. Gold in such quantity that he couldn't imagine it! With hands which were guided by themselves more than by his mental processes he ripped from its place the decayed pieces of the door, including that part of it which held the broken seal and the warning plaque of the former master of the castle and its tunnels. Heeding no inward hesitation, aware of no fear of what might lie waiting within, he directed full savage strength to clearing the doorway of all hindrances. And, once the opening was fully clear, he had no presence of mind in terms of common manners, by which he should have waited for the woman to enter the room first. Flashlight in hand, he rushed into the interior, able to wait for no one or no thing.

He had not thought there was this much gold in the world!

Gold. *Gold!* Chests of it, bags of it, in piles on the floor which it hid completely. In the form of coins, in the form of statues, large and small, in the form of rings and bracelets. Shining back, blindingly almost, the reflected beam of his flashlight, breaking that solid beam into countless yellow stars, bright and golden suns which filled his mind and body with a warmth beyond measure. And in that moment Milhail, if he had considered how he felt, *knew* the real value of gold, *knew* why men from time immemorial had done all in their power to possess the yellow metal, *knew* why this metal above all others was so prized. Gold. It not only looked beautiful, it *felt* beautiful. Even without actually touching it with one's physical person, the sight of it touched *you!* Its softness, its—warmth! Gold was life itself, somehow, as much an element of life as the blood which pulsed through the human body and—

The thought brought his mind off the plane on which it had been traveling. He snapped his head back toward the door. The woman—

She no longer looked the frigid noblewoman he had known earlier tonight. Within the room now herself, her skin seemed to reflect the color, the warmth, of the yellow metal all about them. Her eyes flashed with the brilliance of the precious gold. *Gold!*

And again his thoughts soared upward to that height where everything was wonderful, everything beautiful, everything light-hearted and predisposing you to laugh out loud. Laugh? Why not laugh? Look at all this!

He laughed, a great tumultuous roar from deep within him. He laughed again, seeing that the woman, who had been dressed scantily before, had now shed even that garment. Naked as the day she had been born, Dava rushed from pile of gold to pile of gold, tearing open sacks, dumping over chests, filling her hands with coins, pressing them to her breasts, then lifting them over her head and giving herself a golden shower. Milhail was about to join her in the game, when suddenly, her face flushed with red, she grasped his arm.

“Make love to me!” she said excitedly.

“Make—”

“Here, now, with the gold of Dracula beneath us, around us—make love to me, Milhail!”

He stood as if stunned, not knowing what to do. True, when he had climbed the mountain earlier tonight, it was with the idea that he and this woman would enjoy each other. But here, now—with all this gold—how could she expect him to—?

“Do you no longer think me attractive?” she asked, a slight edge to her voice.

“I—yes. I mean, of course, I think—”

“Then prove it. Prove it *now!*”

She thrust herself against him, her arms moving around his neck and fingers sliding up into his thick blond hair. Her lush red lips moved to his, pressed against his, as her fingers pushed his head forward. The embrace was shorter by far than expected. Suddenly her hands tightened around the hair of his head—and pulled savagely, as she herself moved from him. Her expression was now one of feminine fury, but Milhail did not see it.

His eyes were not upon her. His eyes still were on the gold.

Releasing him, she stepped back still further. "You poor fool," she said with venom. "You poor stupid fool!"

He shook his head to concentrate. Something was happening, something he should pay attention to. "I—" But the lure of the gold was too much. He could not tear his eyes from its luster. But somehow he *must!* He felt that strongly, he felt that life itself depended upon his ability to—but he could not. Her words were coming through to him, but he did not care. What were mere words when all around him was all this wealth? Why must she speak at a time like this? And so angrily? What could there be to make anyone angry?

"You have had your chance, you dolt! Tell me, do you believe in vampires? *Answer me!*"

But there was no answer.

"Very well," she said quietly. "It is said in your village that those who died recently upon this mountain died because of vampires. That is not correct, proud Milhail. That is not at all correct. You see, in reality there are no such things as vampires. Not even the legendary Count Dracula was a vampire. But he was a very wealthy man. The man who calls himself Radu Conescu knew that, although he persists in fearing the same legend you and your people fear. *Are you listening to me?*"

It was obvious he was not.

"You will regret this, I swear you will. You will die the same way as the others. Not by vampires, not at all, but by something much more simple and understandable."

And now Milhail's eyes blinked. There was a sharp sound, something piercing his ears. He blinked his eyes again. His head was clear. It was the woman. Her fingers were at her lips and she was whistling or making some kind of strange sound.

"I am a professional actress, Milhail, and I came up the hard way. My father was a poor but successful animal trainer. I learned much from him."

Milhail's eyes now widened as they focused on the entryway, drawn there by a low growl. A huge wolf, coat a dull white, drew back its lips, exposing dangerous teeth.

"Dava!" Milhail cried. "What are you going—"

"I?" Dava sneered. "*I* am going to do nothing. As he has in the past, my very good friend here will *do* the thing to be done. Not a vampire, Milhail, but a wolf. A killer who, in a land of killer wolves, is beyond suspicion."

Milhail screamed as the wolf's paws left the floor. Thrashing, fighting, continuing to scream, he died there in the underground room of golden riches.

Exactly as the golden plaque he had discarded had promised.

CHAPTER 11

"He had to die anyway, did he not?"

They stood within the black confines of the walls of Castle Dracula, the two of them. The woman now wore a heavy cloak of black and a sneer of contempt. The man also was dressed warmly, but his face was contorted in anger.

"Not at this time, no—he did not have to die. He would have been useful to me alive."

Dava laughed. "But he *was* useful, *Uncle!* He kicked down the door. He did what you were afraid to do. Imagine! With all your planning and scheming, it is yourself who, when the moment of glory presents itself, are afraid to open the door."

Radu Conescu's eyes narrowed. "You read the curse."

Another laugh, this time more derisive than the first. "I read the curse, yes, and I recognized it for what it was. A rich old man's knowledge that he held the village below in a grip of terror. But you! You who claim to be something more than a man in wiles and skill—you take those etched words seriously!"

"Dava, my little one, do not speak thus to me. With the strength of just one of my thumbs I could snap your reedlike neck. If I am sufficiently angered—"

The woman's nostrils flared. "If *I* am sufficiently angered, so too would be my friends. . . ."

She let her words trail off as her eyes went to the wolves who lay at her feet, the white killer of Milhail and four gray brothers of the fang.

Conescu smiled. "Your talents are acknowledged, my dear. As for my fears, let us just say that the wise man does not volunteer to venture into the unknown. The door has been opened without consequence to yourself. That is as it should be. But still I would rather the young man were yet alive." Dava began to speak, but Conescu cut her off. "I agree that his death would have been necessary, yes—but after the gold was down the mountain-side. For a share of our discovered wealth, I am certain he would have cooperated, do you not agree?"

"Perhaps, but—"

"But nothing. He would have cooperated. Now it falls to us alone to transport—"

He stopped. The wolves, all of the five at Dava's feet: their ears had shot up as if they had heard something. One of them began a low growl. Quickly Dava placed the side of her hand over the animal's snout. Her eyes followed Conescu as the squat man moved to a place in the wall where there was a long diagonal crack. The view of the downward-sloping hillscape was perfect, especially the specific area of the tunnel entrance, into which someone was now lowering himself. The someone was recognized by Conescu. He turned to Dava.

"The American, Sanchez. He enters the tunnel."

The woman released her hold on the wolf. "And so there must be another death this night. Do not fear, Radu—my friends will take care of this intruder as they have the others." She whistled her commands. Four of the wolves growled and loped to the tunnel entrance. They had soon disappeared below.

It was not lost upon Conescu that Dava had intentionally kept one of the beasts near her, the large white devil.

Eyeing it, he smiled. "I assume it is but for protection that he remains. You would be utterly stupid to want me dead. I trust you know that."

Dava nodded slowly. "I know that well, Radu. Without you there is no possible way to pack up and leave this place without questions, thus no way to remove the gold."

"Speaking of which, I have not yet seen its luster. Shall we follow our visitor, Mr. Sanchez, into the depths? Perhaps we might even be favored by the opportunity of witnessing his demise with our very eyes."

As the woman came toward him, Conescu turned back to the crack in the wall. "*Wait!*"

"Radu—what is it?"

"Here. Look for yourself. Far down and to the right."

Dava looked. Down near the bottom of the mountain there were tiny flecks of light, as if a swarm of fireflies had suddenly come out of winter hiding and congregated there. But the spots of light were not fireflies. They were torches, more than a hundred of them.

And faintly the man and woman looking from Castle Dracula could hear what were, below, cries of rage from men determined to seek vengeance upon those they considered to be bloodsucking vampires.

It should not have happened, that mass exodus from the inn. It did not seem likely that it would happen, not to Harmon nor to Thorka. Ktara might have known, but she did not make any verbal prediction. In retrospect, it is easy to say that she could have stopped it. But she was not there when it happened.

Both she and Cam were there at the inn, at a table with the sculptor Orgo, when Harmon, Thorka and the police official arrived. Cam excused himself shortly after

the first round of drinks was brought to the newcomers, and did not return.

Orgo thought this odd. "Your friend, Professor Harmon, has been eager to leave for some time. I wonder where he is so anxious to be."

Harmon had shrugged. "What my associate finds to amuse him in the night hours is his business, not mine. On my part, I must admit being intrigued by your presence in a village of this size. You obviously have traveled widely and are a man of no small amount of culture. Why Arefu?"

It was the sculptor's turn to shrug. "An artist—or one who considers himself such—is not among the most highly paid of people, Professor, as I'm certain you know. The relative costs of living here are such that even I can afford them. As to what you might refer to as intellectual stimulation, I no longer seek for this. Perhaps in my former work, from which I have completely retired, I was overly stimulated. In any event, for my present task the setting of this village is perfect. Perhaps you might care to visit my studio tomorrow or the next day?"

Harmon played with his glass. "I would like to accept, but I don't think we will be here all that long. Our schedule is, at the moment, somewhat uncertain."

Ktara nodded. "Speaking of schedules, Professor. I think it is perhaps time."

Harmon checked his watch. It was now nine forty-five. "Yes, I think you are right."

The woman rose. Orgo stood as well. "You must go, all of you?"

"No," Ktara said. "Just myself. I for one would like very much to visit your studio, for personal reasons. But, like the professor, my time is limited. Goodbye."

She extended her hand to Orgo. As he accepted it a

strange look came over his face. It still was there after she had departed the inn.

"An extraordinary woman," Thorka said. "Don't you think so?"

"That is precisely what I was thinking, Dr. Thorka. Extraordinary. It was as if she knew—I—"

Thorka looked at him closely. "Is something the matter?"

"The matter?" Suddenly Orgo's face beamed. "The matter, Doctor? No—not at all. I see it now, I *see* it!" The big man smiled at his two huge hands, whose fingers were spread before him. "Gentlemen, if you will excuse me—"

And then Orgo was gone, almost at a run.

Thorka shook his head. "What do you make of that, Damien—Damien?"

Harmon opened his eyes. "I'm sorry. You were saying, Alex?"

"Only that—I say, were you entering some kind of meditation?"

"That, Alex, is a nice way to call attention to an old man's tendency to doze. It has been a hard couple of days we've been through."

"Acknowledged, that last part at least. But, really, your facial features appeared as if you were trying to contact some being from another world."

Thorka's comment was not an idle one, as Harmon could tell from the penetrating glint in the doctor's eyes.

"Another world, Alex?" he asked slowly. "One day, perhaps, but now it strains the imagination enough to comprehend the various beings which roam our own world."

But as the policeman joined in to agree with Harmon's thought, it took little in the way of imagination for the professor to picture the creature who even now was lift-

ing from within the top of his soil-filled casket, a creature in black formal dress, a creature whose eyes glowed red as they turned toward the window of their Pitesti hostel and to the dark mountain that rose in the moonlight beyond it.

"I say we take matters into our own hands—drive stakes through their black hearts!"

The statement seemed to come completely out of context, almost as if someone had introduced a tape-recorded message of insane raving into what was just then a room permeated with rough joviality and loud comradeship. And then the joviality was gone, being replaced by fierce repetition of the thought which had been the turning point.

"Kill them, yes!"

"The man *and* the woman!"

"Aye, both of them! They both carry the tainted blood!"

". . . stakes through their hearts!"

". . . burn their corpses. . . ."

". . . rid ourselves of this evil, once and for all!"

"No!"

The police official was on his feet, brandishing a pistol. "No, I say. You cannot do this thing."

His statement was greeted with a combination of disdain and laughter as men tossed off the last dregs of their drinks and made plans as to who should carve the stakes and how many torches they would need. "Aye—torches for burning! Fire to purify!"

"And garlic! Strings of garlic!"

"And the cross from the church, do not forget that!"

"No!"

The shot fired into the ceiling over the bar. For a moment there was silence. But only for that long. A round

man with a potato-shaped nose pointed a thick finger at the lawman.

"Not this time. No. You can fire that weapon all you want, but it will not stop us from what we must do. There were no murders in our village before Conescu and his niece came here. There shall be none when we have done with them. The vampires die tonight!"

"You are forgetting Stefan," the policeman said. "He was not killed as the others were. Why do you think Conescu was responsible for his death as well?"

The man behind the bar spoke up. "Conescu is the guilty one, all right. Last night, after the fire in the square, Stefan came here."

"That is not unusual. He worked here."

"So he did, but he did not come behind the bar. No, he went skulking upstairs. I saw him. He acted very suspiciously, he did, and so I followed quietly. He went into Conescu's room."

"And why," the policeman asked, "was I not informed of this before now?"

The barman shrugged. "I did not think it important. In any case, there has been no official announcement concerning Stefan's death. All I know is that the story circulates that he has been murdered."

Potato Nose nodded. "So there you have it. All of the deaths can be traced to Conescu. You, sir, can shoot some of us if you like, but that will not stop the rest of us. It is perhaps better to die from a gunshot wound than from the soul-damning bite of a vampire."

The men around him voiced their agreement.

The lawman murmured, "If I had more men, more guns . . ."

"But you do not," the man with the big nose pointed out. His conversation with officialdom had ended. "Men! *To the mountain!*"

Within minutes they were in the street, the sounds of their shouting reaching the interior of the inn where Thorka and Harmon still sat at their table while the policeman stared blankly out of a window.

"Nothing I can do. . . . If I had more men . . . more guns . . ."

Thorka, who had been watching Harmon carefully during the past events, spoke quietly. "Damien, you have a weapon. Attached to the bottom of your chair. I saw it last night as the chair was folded and placed in my car. It might have helped."

The professor sighed. "Do you think so, Alex?"

"I take it you do not."

Harmon smiled thinly, his eyes turning toward the window and the mountain that it faced.

"You are right. I do not think it would have helped. The suddenness of the change in the crowd's mood, Alex. Did that suggest anything to you?"

Thorka thought for a moment. "I recall reflecting to myself at the time that it was as if someone pulled a master switch to . . . perhaps my meaning is not clear. What I mean is—"

"I know what you mean. You put it very well. It is as if, for reasons unknown to me, someone *wants* the whole town on that mountain top tonight."

Thorka nodded and smiled. "And, Damien, is it the *who* of the question which bothers you? Or, rather, is it the *why*?"

Harmon raised his glass to his lips and took a long swill. It was long enough that it communicated to Thorka that his last questions were not going to be answered.

CHAPTER 12

Dava's eyes flashed with excitement as they turned from the gap in the wall to Conescu.

"What manner of show shall we put on for our nocturnal visitors, Radu?"

"Show? Yes," the squat man reflected. "Yes, some kind of act might well turn the superstitious fools from their goal. But first, Dava, there is the matter of the American."

As if on cue, the muffled sounds came to them. Two gunshots from the direction of the tunnel opening.

"Two, Radu, two shots. Four wolves." She laughed. "I would say our Mr. Sanchez is at this very moment losing a good deal of blood from a newly created opening under his once-firm chin."

"But we must be sure. Quickly—check on it. In the meantime, I will prepare something for the uninvited guests. Hurry!"

Uncertainly the woman left the stone ruins and, with her white wolf, ran to the tunnel entrance. As the wolf leaped downward, she looked again toward the fissure in the wall, but she could not see whether Conescu was still there. She smiled as she directed her eyes down the mountain and to the dots of firelight moving slowly upward from the village. The castle itself would deter them,

if they were as superstitious as they had shown themselves to be.

The castle. Castle Dracula. There in the moonlight, an ice-cold structure, as if carved from a pale block of ice itself. She shivered, not from fear but from an ecstasy. The yellow evil of the moon and rock was delicious to contemplate—and it was hers, just as was the yellow gold below. Yes, she was happy to return to that room. She was aching to return to it from the moment she came up the ladder. Poor Radu. He did not understand. But he would when he saw the gold. It would be so nice, so very nice, if she could murder him, then *all* of it would be hers. But that could not be, so that was that.

Sighing, she took one more look at the crevice in the wall, then started down the ladder, unaware of the eyes which watched her.

The two pairs of eyes which watched her.

One pair belonged to Conescu. Beneath his dark eyes his smile widened. He had decided upon his little show for the villagers. He was pleased with himself, in that it would take care of—how did the saying go? Yes, two birds with one stone. Except there would be many stones, and he cared only that he would be killing one bird. But he must work quickly.

As for the second pair of eyes, beneath those eyes too there was a smile, as from the heights of the castle they watched the thick little man rush to a pile of rocks within the walled confines below.

For an instant, Conescu worried that the dynamite sticks might be wet from snow. A sigh of relief. They were dry. Now the matches—lord, did he forget matches? He might have, in that he didn't smoke, but no—

He fished the matches out of his coat pocket.

Gathering the dynamite sticks, he again checked the view from the fissure in the wall. Not time yet. Wait until

the first ones, the brave ones, get up to the point where those stone fingers clutch at the sky. Then give them the fireworks of hell and see how brave they are!

Conescu laughed out loud.

Odd.

There seemed to be an echo within the ruins. Not that an echo in itself was strange, it was just—

The way his own laugh came back to him. As if it had not been just the mere reflection of his sound coming back to him, but the sound of another. . . .

But of course there was no other. Dava was down in the tunnel, as was the American, and he was presumably dead by now. As she would be soon. And he, himself—

Think of it!

He—Radu Conescu or Ivor Petrov or Sidney Green or Jacques Follette or any of those other names—*he* finally had scored the big score. After all these years of little scores, insignificant accomplishments—insignificant compared to this one!— he had done it. He had *done it!*

And yet tonight he would have to seal the tunnel with dynamite.

Fair enough, in that with the sealing would come the elimination of his partner. If it is true that man cannot live on bread alone, it is also true that a woman cannot live on gold alone. Perhaps she will not die of starvation. No, the wolves will get hungry first. And wolves, being wolves . . .

He laughed again.

This time there was no echo.

Yet he had not moved! He stood in the same position as he had been standing before when . . .

He spread his hands, palms down, before his chest. Inhaling slowly, then exhaling. There. Not a throb, fully under control. Good. This would be no time to let his imagination get away from him. And that would be easy.

This place, the odd way the moon shone through the firm cloud cover in the sky. The stillness up here, the foulness of the tunnels below. And that warning, the gold plaque on the door to the treasure room.

*Else you this very night shall find,
Within, your night of doom.*

Very prophetic it had been for the young Milhail. And perhaps for Dava as well. A curse, one which in truth had prevented himself from crashing down that door. . . .

But curses such as that had no validity, none. Milhail had died because such was Dava's will. Dava would die because he himself willed it. So, then, of what power was the curse?

So, then, why had he respected it?

Prudence. Of course, it was merely that. One did not survive as long as he had, when one dealt in the various activities he had, without a proper measure of care in all matters. In fact, when the time came for the actual removal of the gold, he would enter the room. He would have to. But just as prudence had always been a part of his *modus operandi*, so had risk. The proper risk, not the unnecessary one. In the meantime the tunnel would be sealed—dramatically.

This time the laugh echoed loudly from the stone walls about him.

Conescu froze.

The laugh had not been his!

Whirling, he saw no one to aim the Walther P-38 at. Not until he looked upward toward the top of the crumbling stone stairwell.

"Frightened, Mr. Conescu?" asked a sardonic voice. "If it is fear you feel now, it is well. You have every good reason to fear."

The figure above was huge—taller and with wider shoulders by far than the young Milhail or even the Amer-

ican, Sanchez. Dressed in a long black cloak, his face was a pale white, made paler by the yellow cast of the moonlight which fell upon his features.

Noble features they were. Stern. And yet bemused in a way, while at the same time the eyes flashed red with anger.

"I approve, Frog," the figure said. "Your plan to dynamite the tunnel entrance shall be carried out. Then shall you meet your fate."

Frog? Who knew that? Who possibly could know—?

Trembling, Conescu remembered the gun in his hand. Smiling to himself, he lifted the weapon, aiming directly at the huge figure's chest.

The Walther barked twice.

With no discernible result!

The pallid face above again smiled, the pulled-back lips revealing teeth of abnormal size—teeth which were lengthening!

"Is that any way to behave, Frog?" the rasping voice said. "Is that any way at all to greet a long-lost relative?"

With a scream of approaching madness, Conescu again fired the Walther. Again and again he fired until the last empty shell was ejected. By that time the red eyes were inches from his own.

He could not run, could not move. Somehow the power of those eyes transfixed him where he was. He did not even think he could scream, but he managed to—as, with a laugh of derision, the creature whose identity he now knew removed the pistol from his hand.

By effortlessly snapping the bones of his wrist.

Cam Sanchez waited, his .357 Magnum cocked and aimed at the turn of the tunnel. The gun was now his only chance—or, rather, the four bullets it held were. The two he had expended had added an appreciable number of

minutes to his lifespan. That the four he had left would see him safely into old age, or even middle age, was touch and go. He did not doubt for a second that his stalkers knew what he knew:

That he had reached the end of his run.

That he was trapped.

Suddenly he felt the urge to smoke. In his jacket pocket he had half of a cheroot left from yesterday's flight. The lighter was there too. Hell, why not? He snapped the lighter open and thumbed it into flame. He inhaled deeply, then wondered why he enjoyed the smoke in his lungs. Was it getting to be a habit? Probably not. If he smoked a dozen of the things a year, that would be a record. And what difference did it make, anyway? At present, his predictable remaining years wouldn't be shortened a full second by medical history's swiftest case of death by lung cancer!

That was, of course, it. Why he felt the need. He always felt it when flying, and now he was faced with the biggest flight of his experience. That, at least, was how he had come to regard death. His wise and ancient grandmother had always spoken of it that way. The flight of the soul to its just reward. Winging its way to the Above or to the Below, flapping eagerly to the fate which the components of one's life dictated. "One should not be afraid to meet one's deserts," he could hear her say. "Not if he has kept the Commandments and walked in the ways of Good."

The Commandments. Thou shalt not kill, that was one of them. And Cam had broken it many times, taking into his own hands the powers of the law which seemed ineffectual against organized crime. Those first three years as Harmon's aide . . .

And yet, if there was to be an accountability for what he'd done, he somehow felt sure he could defend his

actions. Was it a crime—or a *sin*—to destroy something, or someone, which was itself a destroyer, and a destroyer of good? Was it wrong to take the Old Testament phrase, *an eye for an eye*, at its literal sense and pump machine-gun bullets into those who themselves had used the same weapon on God knows how many innocent victims?

Vengeance is mine, sayeth the Lord.

Cam exhaled a great cloud of smoke. Maybe, Grandmother, maybe. But just maybe the Heaven you worshiped in life sometimes needed a little help.

He tried to picture the old woman of the leather-lined face, she who had raised him, wondering whether, if she could see him right at this moment, she would be proud of him. He kind of thought that she would—although he also knew she would have her share of scolding words.

He had walked where men should not. He had trusted too much in the ways of Science, and not in the Knowledge of the Real.

The Real. A term that had meant diametrically opposed concepts to the old woman and the young wide-eyed boy growing up in the slums of America's biggest city. "You look for the light, *muchacho*, but refuse to accept the existence of the dark. Keep the watch for both, little one, else you will be swallowed whole, as the night owl devours its meals."

Colorful language. Picturesque. And all too true.

"Do not," she once told him, "while attempting to be of superior intelligence, be in reality a *stupido*."

Stupido.

He had wondered many times what his grandmother would make of Harmon and his ventures into the vaults of forbidden knowledge. As for right now, he did not have to wonder what she would make of himself. He had, without doubt, been very, very stupid.

He had not checked—not even bothered to look—to

be sure no one was about the castle before he'd gone to the tunnel entrance. Three people had died horribly up on this mountain, and he'd disregarded that knowledge completely. Straight to the entrance, then down into the tunnel at a jump. By the time he reached the place where the dead Milhail lay on the piles of gold, his fate was sealed. He heard the thumps from the end of the tunnel he'd just walked. Calmly, his big pistol in his fist, he waited.

Until he saw the four pairs of eyes reflected in the torchlight.

They came at him in a rush.

Still, he managed to draw a two-handed bead on the lead wolf, a dark gray hulk of leaping fury. Steady on the aim, and steady on the trigger squeeze.

The crash of the explosion against the walls of the tunnel sounded as if he'd unleashed his own personal-size hydrogen bomb. But, even though he could hear nothing but the resultant ringing like every Bell telephone in the world being summoned into action, his eyes told him that his first shot had scored. The lead wolf landed in a heap before him, the top half of its head splattered yards behind it.

One down, three to go.

One shot more, and the odds were reduced as another gray wolf gave up its ghost in a reluctant shattering of skull and flesh.

Two down, two to go. But when he brought the Magnum up again, it was to find that the black darkness was his only target.

For a moment he grinned. Then the grin faded.

The last two wolves had been smart—too smart. They had figured out something which Cam had just at that instant realized. There was but one way into the tunnel—and one way *out* of it! And that entrance-exit was

shrouded in darkness. Why attack your victim in the light of a torch, when all you have to do is wait until he comes to you, as he eventually must. Unless . . .

Cam had been in these tunnels once before: that first time when they'd entered the crypt of the Count. They had gone through an opening by one of the upright stone fingers, an opening which had been sealed by a huge boulder. It had been heavy, but from the outside he had been able to dislodge it easily. And yet . . .

Obviously someone had put it back into place. The last recollection he had of the great stone was its rolling from him, down the slope to crash-halt among the tree barrier below. And yet things had not been left that way. He himself had seen the stone, or a similar boulder, in place earlier this morning. No doubt the entrance had been resealed that first night, after they had left. By Ktara's mental powers. But it was not mental powers Cam was concerned with at the moment.

It was physical powers—his. Would they be great enough to move the stone?

First, of course, he would have to find it, although he did not expect that chore to be difficult. If, that is, he was in the particular tunnel which led to the burial crypt. If he was not, if he was in fact in another, completely separate tunnel which did not connect with the other—

But that would not be likely. No, not with the treasure room where it was. Even in his death-sleep, the Count would want to keep his gold under some semblance of surveillance. Therefore, the odds were that—

Odds? He wouldn't have any odds simply standing here. He clicked on his flashlight and headed toward where the crypt—and the exit—had better be.

The floor sloped downward, as it should if it was leading where he hoped, but suddenly it took a sharp turn to the right. Having no choice but to follow it, Cam dis-

covered another turn, this time back to the left. A minute, two minutes, went by, the big Puerto Rican now and then flashing his light to his rear to be sure that the wolves were not getting too close behind him.

They had not gotten too close, not yet. But from the little circles of reflected light which came back from his flash, he knew they were following.

It was after one of these checks that, when he swung his light forward again, he spotted something black and horizontal on the stone floor ahead. He thought he knew—hoped he knew—what it was. He did.

It was part of a rotted door, much like that which had sealed off the gold room. This one, if his luck was holding, was one which he himself had wrenched from its place some months back. There was one way to be certain.

Check the contents of the room beyond. If it was the small oval-shaped room . . .

But somehow his legs no longer wanted to move. His own body was rebelling against going through that doorway, his senses reacting in full to the odor of decay which now more than before permeated the darkness around him. He could not enter that room!

But he had to. The beam of his light could not turn the corner to that part of the room he had to see. His legs *must* move!

Making a rapid sign of the cross, he forced his left foot forward, sliding the right behind it. The movement caused the spell of paralysis which had been upon him to lift. Yet the ominous dread remained, before—and after—his light beam found what it sought.

It was the only object in the room. Of stone and metal worked into grotesquely shaped beads and bodies of gargoyles, it was of very ancient age. The casket of Dracula!

They had left it, transferring the Count to a lighter

coffin for easier transport. At the time, Cam had hoped he would never see the huge death-box again. Now it was a welcome, though no less dreadful, sight. He now knew the way up.

Backing from the room, he flashed his light in the direction of the wolves. They still were behind him. A bit closer now. They could be forgotten for a moment and were, as Cam moved quickly along the stone floor which now had flattened out. Shortly it turned sharply to the right, then it began moving upward. Not in the gradual slope he had been walking upon, but by steps—crumbling age-worn steps which led straight up and to—

The boulder which he could not budge.

The footholds for leverage were not the best, but even so Cam was able to apply nine-tenths of his full strength against the rounded surface of the rock. Recalling that he had moved it that first time from an angle, he pushed with everything he had from every conceivable angle.

But it did not budge. And then, to his own heaving breath, was added another sound. It came from the darkness below him.

The low growl of a wolf.

He trained his light on the point where the tunnel turned. He cocked the Magnum. He fished from his jacket the half-smoked cheroot and ignited its end. Four shots left. Two wolves. The odds could be worse.

And very shortly they were.

The first wolf moved like lightning, streaking around the turn and taking the steps in bounding leaps, traversing a full dozen of them before Cam had the creature's salivating jaws square over the Magnum's sights and a half dozen more before the trigger squeezed.

The exploding boom was simultaneous with the wolf's brains splashing every which way. Cam took pride in the

shot, then fleetingly recalled the old maxim about pride going before a fall.

And immediately he experienced a demonstration of the maxim's truth.

What happened is simply explained. The steps upon which Cam stood were ravaged with the cracks of time. The firing of the big pistol sent shock waves reverberating through walls, ceiling—and steps. The step upon which Cam's forward foot, his right, rested, gave way. But as Cam hurtled downward, head first, to the bottom of the stairway, he had little time to reflect upon the physics of the situation. All he knew was that he was falling and that, at the bottom of his fall, the last killer wolf waited.

His training in *ukemi*—the Oriental art of falling—directed his responses without benefit of conscious thought. That was both a blessing and a curse. The blessing part consisted of his automatically taking the impact on his left forearm, his fist curled backward into his chest, then rolling over onto his upper arm, shoulder and back. The curse part consisted of his automatically freeing both hands for the fall.

Which translates into his dropping both flashlight and gun!

He was up in a crouch instantly. He was no more than twenty steps from the bottom. Gun and flashlight were at the bottom, as the beam of the light showed clearly. It also clearly showed a third thing.

A gray furred thing with a nasty growl and fangs to match.

The wolf leaped.

Heavily, Cam's left boot-sole snubbed the snout of the beast, dropping it to the bottom of the stairway and onto the stone floor. It fell outside of the span of light, but the

four padded and separate sounds of its landing told Cam there would be a second assault.

Into the light again came the great gray wolf. The fur along the left side of its upper jaw was matted with blood, the dark redness matching the color of its crazed eyes. Its breathing was heavy, until it stopped.

Like a marksman with a rifle, like a karate brick-breaker, it ceased its breathing, its eyes narrowing onto its target. Then its nostrils quivered, indicating a slow inhale. When it exhaled, in a thundering snort, it lunged.

Again Cam's left foot shot downward. Again it connected, but it was a grazing blow off the left already-bloodied side of the animal—the animal which kept coming!

The Y of Cam's right hand thumb-finger split came up with full force against the chest of the beast as it slammed into his midsection. The momentum of the impact threw the man to his back, but the shooting spinal pain of the collision made little impression upon him. He was too busy fighting off the jaws that were attempting to take great chunks out of his face.

A right handblade cracked into the wolf's head just over the eyes. With a shout of pure destruction, Cam followed it up with a straight-on thrust of the first two fingers of his left hand—straight into the beast's right eye. Withdrawing the fingers quickly, he slammed both hands around the creature's neck and straightened his arms upward, then violently to the left. The wolf screamed as its head crashed into the wall of the stairwell, then screamed again as the act of meeting was repeated. The third thrust was stronger, Cam now having gotten to his knees. Again the wolf roared in pain.

At the fifth wet and running red smash into the wall, the wolf did nothing at all. Released from Cam's hands it simply folded up like a rag doll and found its lowest

point of gravity, roll-twitching to the bottom of the stairs in unbreathing death.

Cam blew from his lungs the stored-up breath he had within them. He rose to his feet.

"Nicely done, Mr. Sanchez."

She stood at the top of the stairs, smiling down upon him.

He, on his part, did not smile back. "How long have you been here?"

"Long enough to witness your taming of the animal."

"You might have helped," he said.

Ktara raised her eyebrows. "Help would have been superfluous. You handled things very nicely, I thought. As for now, I suggest we leave this place. I cannot leave the opening this way for very long."

Cam nodded, then turned his back on the woman. At the bottom of the stairs, he secured both the flashlight and the weapon.

When he slipped through the place where the boulder had been pushed slightly backward, Ktara glanced at the Magnum.

"You feel you really need that?"

Cam's smile was not friendly. "It comes in handy now and then. Unlike certain types of assistance, it's never mentioned that it considered itself superfluous." He might have added something more, but his attention was drawn from Ktara to the sounds and sights directly below him.

They were just even with the nearest line of trees. The men, their shouting, their blazing torches.

He looked to Ktara for an explanation. She gave it tersely.

"The Master. For his own reasons, he desires their presence."

CHAPTER 13

"The people from the village, they come to watch your fate, Conescu."

As the Count turned from the broken part of the wall, his face once again smiled into Conescu's range of vision. A violent shudder racked the smaller man's body, which otherwise he could not move at all. He wanted to scream, to plead with this creature, but his voice also he could not control. All he could manage was a sobbing whimper.

"Apologies?" the vampire asked. "From you, Frog? Or do you not wish to apologize, but only to beg for mercy?"

"Ahhh-ahhhh—"

"I am afraid I cannot comprehend your meaning. You must be more clear than that."

"Ahhh-ahhhhh-ahh. . . ."

Dracula's eyebrows raised. "It is plain that you have not the aristocratic mode of speech, Frog. Imagine that such a one as you had the audacity to claim a blood relationship with myself! It comes very close to being scandalous. Although—in one way you shall have that relationship with me. Our blood shall mingle, Frog. Thus will your claim be fulfilled. Tell me, does it please you?"

"Ahhhhh-ahhhhh—"

The Count's eyes narrowed. "I am tired of your tedious mode of expression. It is offensive to my ear, Frog. Your ignoble tongue and its disgusting animal

sounds can be tolerated no longer. I wish it removed. Do you understand me, Frog? *I wish you to remove your tongue!*"

Conescu's face was now paler than the moonlight. Those eyes of the other—they were now bright red, the centers of them burning with small dots of white heat.

"What is this, Frog? You do not rush to obey my wish? Why should you not wish to serve the master of this castle with such a small act? Is this the thanks I receive for the hospitality I have provided you—even though unwittingly? I am not pleased that you hesitate."

And now the vampire laughed. "Ah, but I see the problem. You are experiencing a problem of your own. You *want* to obey me, but you cannot, can you? It is that you cannot move your hands to accommodate me. But there I believe that I can be of service. There. Now you can do as I ask."

It was true. Conescu suddenly had feeling in both his arms, pain shooting upward and into his brain from his right, broken, wrist. Instantly he tried to run, but his freedom of movement had not been extended to those parts of his body which could accomplish the task. Only his arms—and yes, his mouth, he could open it wider. Perhaps—

"N-no!" he said. Now he could speak! Now he could try to reason with this monster. Now—

"Now you will do as I bid, Frog."

"No, please—I—"

But he *was* doing as the vampire had bid. Both hands, even his throbbing right one, were slowly moving upward before his chest, their fingers extended toward his throat like talons, twitching with seeming eagerness to do as he had been directed. But they must not, must not! Surely he could stop their movement—were they not *his* hands?

They were, but in some other, unnatural way they were

not. As Conescu's thick arm muscles strained in the attempt to stop the progress of the hands, his eyes bugged out in the horror of what he knew was coming. The sweat which had been pouring down his forehead now also was drenching his back, a cold icy sweat which stabbed into the very marrow of his bones.

"Pl-please! I cannot—"

"Of course you can, Frog. Do you think I would ask of you something that you could not do? *Remove your tongue!*"

As if on signal, Conescu's fingers jammed into his open mouth. The movement was swift, as was the movement which followed—the grasping fist of Conescu's strong left hand which jerked outwardly, the thing it had sought firm within its tightly inward-curved fingers, a horizontal geyser of blood drenching his fist and, beyond it, the stone floor.

Conescu stared in disbelief at what he had done, but then the eyes of the vampire had again locked upon his.

"Well done, Frog. And now I have another chore for you, which I trust you will perform with even more dispatch. The explosives. I wish you to place them exactly where you had planned. Do it quickly, then return here. The villagers who approach expect their show, and we would not wish to disappoint them, is that not so?"

And now it was as if a flash of light from the vampire's eyes had stopped the blood-flow from Conescu's mouth. Nodding dumbly toward those eyes, the thick man felt a measure of control surge within his body. This part of it he gladly would do—to get out from within these walls, to escape the presence of this creature who meant to do him even more harm, a horrible harm—he knew it!

"The explosives," Dracula repeated, a warning edge to his tone. "Put them in place, then return to me."

The explosives, yes. A dozen of the sticks. As his hands

reached down to gather them, something long and red dropped from one. Conescu closed his eyes to fight off the nausea that was overtaking him. He could not look at the thing. *But I must get to the outside! Must do as he says until I can get free! Must hurry!*

He hurried, forcing his eyes open as his hands closed about the dynamite sticks, forcing them to focus on anything other than the eyes of the dreaded vampire as his boots quickly moved across the stone floor and up and over a portion of broken wall and out onto the cold white snow which lay under the blanket of yellow-hazed moonlight. There now, below him, at the far side of the forest edge, were the torches of the villagers. He could hear their shouts of encouragement to each other as his own feet took him steadily to the entrance he had made into the tunnel. Yes, yes—hurry! He himself wanted to shout back at them and knew he could not, knew why he could not. That long red thing which blood-drenched the floor of the castle—

Hurry! Please hurry. If you get here in time, he will not be able to—

As the thought came to him, he turned his eyes toward the pile of black rock behind him. There, staring back at him from the depths of the darkness, were two orbs of red. *Put them in place, then return to me*, the vampire had commanded. But he would not! He would remain out here until the men from the village—

Yet—

He was placing the sticks around the hole in the rock. He was doing so methodically, quickly! *No! Not so quickly, please!* Please? Who was he pleading with—himself? Who else was there to plead with, to petition? Long ago Conescu had decided there were no gods, nothing at all to the so-called world of the spirit. And yet he should have known. There always had been a tiny voice

within him, a voice of warning whenever he trod too close to things which were not of the realm of the natural. He had felt it when he first conceived this project, felt it again even more strongly when, in the tunnel below, they had come upon the golden plaque. He had felt then that the words meant what they said, that he should not break the monogrammed seal—

*Else you this very night shall find,
Within, your night of doom.*

The young ox, Milhail . . . and now Dava. . . . As for himself, he had not gone in! Why should the curse apply to him?

But it would not apply, he knew suddenly. No, he would meet his doom out here in the night. He would die—without ever having seen the full treasure for which he was dying. . . .

If only they would hurry!

But he knew they would not make it in time. For he had completed the placement of the explosives, and even now he was moving back toward the castle, to the low place in the broken wall, guided by the two red beams of light which seared into his head as if they were molten steel cables—cables which somehow had anchored themselves upon the back of his brain and were pulling him, reeling him in as one would reel in a fish which had been caught and which was being brought aboard a boat, a dark foreboding skeleton of a boat which sailed in black waters not meant for the trespassing of mortal man. And here the fisherman ruled all, the black-caped fisherman with the eyes of red coal. The powerful vampire with the white face of Death. An autocratic nobleman whose word—or thought—was law.

Conescu dropped to his knees before the ruler of the castle. His eyes closed to await the inevitable: their closing forever. Only in the back of his mind, in one small portion

of his brain, was there any hope at all. The shouts of the villagers were getting louder. By small degrees, yes, but increasingly so. There might be a chance. . . .

No, there would be no chance.

"Open your eyes, Frog," Count Dracula commanded. "I wish you to witness your doom with all of your senses. To allow otherwise would be a kindness you do not deserve. Open your eyes—and rise."

Conescu docilely obeyed, steeling himself. He had lived his life in a way which always had accepted risk and the probable outcome of an adventure turned sour. He would not begin now, at the end of that life, behaving like a coward. He had been a hard man, a strong man. And he vowed he would die as such.

The voice of the vampire, however, seemed amused.

"It is good for a man to meet death on his feet, just as it is good for death itself to come quickly and cleanly. I say to you, Frog, that your death shall not be thus. You fear now, but your fear shall grow to proportions undreamed of before you breathe your last." The vampire laughed, a deep laugh low in his throat. "See, Conescu, if I am not right. Look into my face and see if you can do so with the complacency you attempt to affect. *Look!*"

Conescu could not do otherwise. And now it was that the structure of the vampire's face began to change. At first it was as if the features were melting, as if flesh had suddenly become fluid, but no—solid was turning into solid, but with a new grotesqueness, a new visage which could not have been designed in any place other than the very deepest depths of Satanic Hell itself.

The thick black eyebrows grew thicker still, the sleek hairline at the brow moving downward until it appeared there hardly was any flesh above the eyes which was not covered by the now shaggy, furlike hair. The nose, no

longer aristocratic, had flattened, its nostrils flaring at the edges, and the lips, redder and thicker than before, had curled back, making space for teeth which were no longer simply *teeth*, but fangs at least twice the length of those from which they had grown. And the eyes now, even more so than before—as they drew even closer and closer—

Lord, how Conescu now wanted to scream, to plead, to pray, to—

The vampire's voice was deeper now, its menace emphasized by its sibilance.

"I thirst, Frog. You shall feed me. You may attempt to flee if you like."

Flee? Yes! He *could* move his body now—he *could* run. He—

He turned swiftly on his heel. His boots hit the surface of the stone floor twice before they were lifted upward, before all of him was lifted high into the air as if he had weighed nothing, as if he were but a paper doll!

"Nnnnnnnnggg!"

A deep booming laugh. "Like a frog you run, like a frog you croak! Like a frog you flail out at the air—and like a frog your eyes grow round and white! But not for long—yes, Frog?"

Held high above the vampire's head, Conescu now was lowered—slowly, steadily downward to the open jaws which waited. Lower and lower until his own frantic eyes no longer could see the eyes of the other. No—Nooooo. . . .

He felt the slicing entry into his throat, like that of a sword blade—no, two sharp points, like needles or finely honed ice picks. The pain, however, was gone almost before it reached his brain. Still his arms and legs flailed out, striking against the vampire, he knew, but as if striking against the very rock of the castle walls for all

the good it did him. Yet he could not stop, must not stop. *Oh stop, please let me go, don't—*

The heat! It was taking the pain away from his throat and spreading from there into his chest, his shoulders and arms and downward into his stomach. And yet even before the impact of the intense searing was fully felt in the back of his brain, he felt an icy coldness in his finger tips and in his toes, a coldness which was rising to wrist and ankle, to forearm and shin, to elbow and knee. Coldness which was more than coldness. A numbness—as if these parts of him no longer existed, as if they were—

Dead.

A gurgling sound from his throat slammed the truth into his mind. *My God! He's draining all my blood!* Again he tried to scream, but no more than a pathetic croak reached his ears. That and the now-constant wet sound from under his jaw. *Oh, please—please no. . . .*

His groin, his stomach, now were numb as if gone. It would be only a matter of moments. And outside beyond the walls, the cries of the villagers—

Suddenly he felt himself being lifted upward again. His eyes did not want to look down at the face of the vampire, but it was as if they had no choice. *Ahh!*

The bottom half of Dracula's face was bathed with blood, as were the teeth which were exposed by the smiling lips of the vampire. The eyes of the creature now were darting from Conescu to the wall of the castle. He too was listening to the approaching men.

"It is time, Frog. I would wish for a few more moments of nourishment, but I forego that pleasure. Too, I wish you alive for these last few instants. Come, let us greet our neighbors."

For a brief moment the shouting of the nearest wave of

men stopped. A heavy oaken stake was pointed at Cam and Ktara. The pointer's voice was strident:

"Why are you on this mountain tonight, American?"

The question was asked in Romanian. Ktara replied in the same language: "He is here—as am I—for the same reason as you. To see for our own eyes if the curse of Dracula Mountain is true."

There were nods and grunts of approval. The man with the stake, however, shook his head. "You may come with us if you like, but we are not here solely to see anything. We are here to *destroy!*"

The last word was accompanied by his thrusting the stake upward toward the castle walls. As if following a stage direction, other men took up the shout, holding their torches and weapons high.

"*Destroy!*"

"*Kill the devils!*"

"Kill the vamp—"

The final, abbreviated cry was uttered from someone far back in the crowd. A lone voice, belonging to someone who obviously was the last to focus his eyes where those of all the others suddenly had been drawn. A new shout went up—an unintelligible sound which formed no word or phrase except one of cognition. Then:

"There—on the wall! *High, up there!*"

Even Cam unconsciously inhaled sharply. The figure and face which the moonlight illuminated so well on the topmost rampart of the ruined castle were nothing new to him. And yet even he could never remain unaffected by encountering them, regardless of the number of times he had done so in the past.

Again, it was as if the entire scene was stage-managed for maximum effect.

The arms of the vampire were high in the air, his black cape flowing full below him, emphasizing his great

height and the breadth of his shoulders. From his hands dangled the pathetic form of Conescu, whose arms and legs twitched and jerked in pain, whose terror-filled face too was bathed in the ghostly moonlight. There was a moment in time in which there was a perfect stillness in the air, an absolute silence. Then there was a voice—a voice of ironic amusement, of quiet but firm command, of bone-rav evil:

“You who have dared to tread my mountain, you who come here with torches and weapons—see, all of you, what befalls one who so has dared! See the fate of him who dared to call himself the blood-kin of Dracula and who dared to defile the rocks of my dwelling place! *See!*”

For a moment Cam thought the entire crowd was going to bolt down the mountainside. But no one moved. Seemingly frozen where they stood, mouths and eyes open as far as was humanly possible, they watched—watched as, apparently with no great effort at all, the arms of him who stood on the ramparts bent downward, then straightened, releasing the burden of his hands to sail through the air as if independently flying. Upward the figure of Radu Conescu sailed, arcing outward from the black walls, then downward, coming to a crunching stop near the lip of the hole he had caused to be drilled into the mountain surface. There seemed to be no way possible for the man to still be alive after that impact, but it was so! Blood streaming from his face, Conescu struggled to push himself to his feet. Wobbling, he half made it, lifting up one arm in a gesture of supplication to the figure high above him.

It was then that the master of the castle laughed, a laugh which made the flesh of every witness on that mountain crawl, one which gripped the very innards in a hold of primeval fear. Cam felt it and, as he looked at Ktara's face, he knew that she also felt something similar.

After all these centuries of serving the Black Master, she too—

The laugh ended abruptly. Just as abruptly the right arm of Dracula rose from within the folds of his cape and extended toward the half-risen Conescu. Just as the half-dead man raised a final pleading hand, the vampire's index finger pointed sharply at the place where the trembling Conescu stood.

The eyes of Count Dracula flashed white.

Then the dynamite exploded, mingling the life and limbs of Radu Conescu with an upward hailstorm of rocks ranging in size from powdered dust to head-sized boulders. One of the latter, which bounced down the hill and came to rest no more than five feet from where the first line of the villagers stood, proved not to be a boulder at all.

It was the bloodied, burnt and tongueless head of the defiler of Dracula Mountain.

"My God—*look!*"

Fingers now pointed toward the castle heights, all eyes followed them. Where the great figure of the vampire had stood, there was now no man or anything in the form of a man. Instead, a giant bat soared upward with a blood-chilling shriek, then leveled off—and swooped downward. Directly toward the crowd of villagers.

Torches dropped, as did stakes, as crowd became mob—as the silence which had held them still was devastated by cries and shrieks coming from the throats of running men. Running, pushing, shoving, clawing, half-trampling each other in their attempt to achieve the only goal which had meaning right now—to escape this place of the undead!

They stood in the empty aftermath, Cam and Ktara. The villagers were nowhere to be seen, although the sounds of their crashing through underbrush and their

shouts of exhortation and pain still could be heard. As for the giant bat, it was gone from sight as well.

Ktara spoke first. "Come. We too must go down. Preparations must be made. We must leave this place before the dawn of tomorrow."

Cam glanced toward the walls of the castle. "And him?"

"He will be with us when we depart, but first he must see to the protection of his gold." She looked at him steadily. "Also, there is another thing he must see to."

CHAPTER 14

The above-ground explosion sent its shock waves throughout the tunnels carved into the bowels of the mountain. Such was the durability of its overall construction that only beneath the point of detonation did the stress on natural faults in the rock prove too much. There, three great slabs of rock—two from above and one from the side of the tunnel—tore free and crunched together. Even without the smaller rock and earth debris which filled in the gaps where these three giants did not quite meet, the entrance which Radu Conescu had caused to be drilled into the underground vaults was effectively sealed. Elsewhere below the surface, the force of the blast tore apart the last remaining vestiges of what once had been solid doors of oaken wood. Other than these and the clouds of ageless dust which stirred within the dark rooms and their connecting passages, there were no further wounds to inconvenience the quiet muteness to which rock and space returned after their single momentary shudder.

Even the room of gold was now still, except for the sounds of metal pushing against metal and the laborious breathing which accompanied them in the dark. For a moment the woman Dava thought she had been buried beneath the piles of gold which had shifted and cascaded down around her at the deafening sound and blinding flash of the explosion. But it was not so, not completely.

She had been knocked prone, and much of her body had been covered by the precious metal, but her face was free as were her hands. There would be no problem in digging her way out.

As she began to do so, she realized that she could hear her efforts, the sounds of her groping mingling with the high-pitched ringing which the blast had left in her ears. She had thought that perhaps her hearing had been damaged permanently, and had thought the same about her eyesight. But that too probably was not damaged. The total darkness in which she found herself no doubt was the result of the torch on the wall outside being extinguished.

Never to see again, never to see all my lovely gold. . . .

A thought which sickened her, but one which could come to pass even now, unless she could relight the torch somehow. But the first order of business was to dig herself free.

She knew that the tunnel entrance had been sealed. At least her intuition told her that was the meaning of the explosion. Radu meant to keep it all for himself, to seal her within, to let her die from starvation. She laughed. Poor Radu. Such a fool. She knew what he did not—that there was another way out. She even knew where that way out was.

The American had shown her that.

And now, as Dava inch by inch clawed her way out of the wealth of Dracula, she pouted. The American. She had hoped that she would find him here, alive. She had always admired strong men, but this man had a strength unlike others she had known. A physical giant, yes, but there was more to it than that. A fearless something which he had, something which made her smile when she came upon the carcasses of her first two wolves which lay life-

less near the entrance to her gold room. And then the third shot had come and she followed it to its source—to the place where the second two wolf corpses lay. The one with the broken, battered body . . .

The American was a man worthy of her. But he was gone. She had smiled when she saw the steps leading upward, had known that was an exit and knew that this knowledge gave her an advantage over Radu, should he try to seal her within this mountain of wealth. She had been tempted to climb the stairs, to see for herself exactly how the exit worked and where precisely it came out—but somehow she could not. She had been away from her gold too long as it was. Her fingers longed to caress the soft metal, her eyes ached to bathe themselves in the brightness of the yellow wealth.

To bathe, as even now she was bathing. Returning to the gold room with her last remaining wolf, she had stripped herself of her clothing so that her entire body could experience the touch of luxury. In the flickering light of the torch outside, she had poured coins upon her shoulders as if her skin was being cleansed by a shower of golden rain. She had danced among the treasure, her feet digging in up to their ankles in what was a field of yellow wheat, her arms hugging to her breast a head-and-shoulders statue of some oriental despot; an ugly countenance he had, her golden lover, or at least some might say it was ugly. *But Dava does not think so, my Yellow Emperor. To me your golden skin, your golden eyes, even your stern golden scowl—all are beautiful!*

It was as if she were a female Midas with the power to turn all she touched into gold. *Would you like that?* she sang to the white wolf which watched her with uncomprehending eyes. *Would you like to live forever, to be forever a thing of beauty, to be forever treasured?*

She sang, she laughed, she danced around the won-

derful fantasy universe which was this one small room beneath the surface of the earth. She poured her wealth over herself and over the body of the dead Milhail, leaning down close to his torn throat and frowning with disapproval at the twisted features of his face which still recorded the final terror which had been the last conscious thoughts of his now blank mind.

For shame, Milhail! See how I provide for your funeral, see how I insure that you never will know poverty again. Ah, but you cannot see, can you? A pity, Milhail, but perhaps, wherever it is your soul has gone to, it will appreciate what your flesh does not.

She laughed with glee as she placed two old Persian coins on the eyes of the corpse. She wondered for a moment whether Milhail now looked more like a being from outer space or some stuffy thick-spectacled university professor, then she no longer concerned herself with such questions.

Because then the explosion from above knocked her flat.

Even so, she laughed as now she swam to freedom. That's what it was, of course—swimming in the Golden Sea, stroking through waves both high and low, both angry and placid, toward that Golden Land which lay just beyond.

How long she swam she had no way of telling, but suddenly she realized that she was free. And now her body felt chilled, as if leaving the golden waters was in fact leaving the warmth of some primeval womb, a protective cave of light. . . .

Light. Yes, she must have light. She must *see* her wealth as well as touch it. . . .

She had had a flashlight, but it was gone now. She'd never find it in this sea of metal. Of course! Milhail's light. He had held it in his right hand, tried to fight off the

attack of her killer wolf with it. If he had not dropped it . . .

But she had buried him—where? Where exactly in this golden cemetery had she interred his now valuable remains? She laughed, this time at herself. With all her wealth, she was reduced to grave robbing—taking from the dead a thing of comparatively little worth, a piece of thin steel. But I shall give it back, Milhail, in candid honesty I shall return your flashlight to you—if you will guide my hand to—

The fingertips of her sweeping right hand suddenly felt cold and sticky. With a shudder she realized that she had located the throat of the dead man. Jerking back her hand, she calmed herself. Had she really been just about to scream? She? Admit it. Yes, it was because of the suddenness of the feeling. That was all. Be thankful that the body had been located so quickly. Now, if only the flashlight is—

It was. It also was in fuctioning condition, as she learned to her gratitude when she clicked on the switch.

Dust. It was everywhere in the air, but heavy on the other side of the threshold. Fine dust, so fine that it had not made her choke or even cough. She smiled. In her golden world even the dust and decay were of superior quality. She played the beam of the light over the elements of her golden world and felt the warmth of the yellow metal return to her body.

But she must light the torch. Yes, the batteries of the flashlight would not last forever. The torch must be—

Matches? She carried none in the cape she had worn. Perhaps Milhail . . . I must disturb you another time, my blond warrior. . . .

His jacket pocket held a pipe, a pouch of tobacco, and the matches she sought. Quickly she stepped through

the doorway, the touch of the stone floor cold to her feet. It was difficult to see through the dust, but the flashlight beam told her that the torch was no longer held in its metal wall-base. If the blast had broken it free, it would probably be further along into the tunnel, anywhere along its length. However—

The light fell on a piece of wood which had been part of the door frame. To the touch it felt dry, untainted by the wet rot which had characterized the main section of the door which no longer was in place. Perhaps . . .

The wood took to the match immediately. Excellent. There was more of it lying around which also could be used. Her smile widened, then froze on her face as she placed the lighted torch in its holder. At the bottom of the piece of wood was a blood-red semicircle. On it was the lefthand downstroke of the Gothic letter *D*.

An omen?

One no longer believes in omens or in curses. One does not!

But when she turned to again look at her treasure, she did not feel the warmth return to her. The coldness of the floor, the stone. She must get back inside where—

And suddenly her right foot no longer was cold. The flashlight beam hurried to illuminate her toes.

They half-covered the golden plate which had served as warning.

With a cry she jumped back. "*No!*"

Immediately she regained a measure of control. Do not be stupid! That which guarded the room no longer is in place. It can harm no one.

Part of her mind was not convinced, she knew that. She could hear a small voice within her, a voice which asked uncomfortable questions:

Cannot harm you? Then why do you not throw it

from its place? Why do you not pick it up and heave it far from you?

Because, she replied, because it is gold, is it not? Is it not also part of my fortune?

But she knew, with all of her conscious mind, that this was one piece of gold that she did not wish to touch, not even for that brief moment which casting it down the tunnel would make necessary.

It is suddenly so cold in here.

Even within my treasure room, it is cold. It is as if some new spirit has entered this place. The wolf, even he begins to growl. Do you sense something too? What is it? Why has the very gold of my wealth lost its warmth? I touch it with my feet, now with my hands—and it no longer gives pleasure. Nothing but the unpleasant chill do I feel. Why—?

Milhail?

Is it his presence here which fouls my treasury? Is it his coin-covered eyes, his frowning throat from which flows the sticky stream of blood which the cold has dried into jagged veins across the sallow cheeks of his upside-down face? Do you dare to take my comfort from me, Milhail? Shall I have my wolf-friend kill you again?

"No," she said aloud, the sound of her own voice helping to calm her nerves. "No, you cannot die again, Milhail. But I cannot have you here with me. You shall stand guard outside my door. Yes, I shall find some golden nails, and with a golden hammer I shall drive them through your arms and legs and have you stand as a sentinel before my royal suite. Perhaps I shall even arm you with a golden sword, if you stand erect enough. You see, Milhail, even my friend the wolf growls his displeasure with you. I think my idea is a sound one. Would you care to express your opinion, if you have one?"

"The idea is essentially sound," came a deep voice

from behind her. "But it requires some minor modification."

The room suddenly was as if engulfed in ice.

Her turn toward the doorway was impeded by the golden floor covering which seemed to clutch at her feet. The man in the doorway, the man in black with the face of white, the oddly attractive nobleman—

"I—I like strong men," she said feebly. She tried to smile, but could not. Her lips would not form the way she wanted.

The man, however, did smile. His eyes moved to the body of Milhail back to her. They were strange eyes. Red, they appeared to be. Or were they gold?

"You also find my gold attractive?" he asked, an edge to his voice she could not interpret.

"*Your—*"

"*Mine.*"

"Yes. I somehow knew—"

The eyes flashed. "I am not interested in what you know. You hold no interest for me whatsoever, except your payment for disturbing what belongs to me. The man you called your relative already has had his payment exacted from him. It now is your time."

Defiantly the woman stared back into the Count's face. "Do you think I shall be as easy a victim as Radu? I assume he is dead, which is none of my concern—but I shall prove more difficult to kill, by whatever means you have in mind. I vow that—*Count Dracula!*"

The vampire inclined his head in a mock bow. "I correct myself. I find you do interest me somewhat. You know my name, you therefore have an idea of who and what I am—and yet you challenge me? A rare thing, very. I would be inclined to inquire of you precisely how you thought you might carry out your defiance, but

the presence of your weapon of death makes the inquiry unnecessary."

The large white wolf had been growling for some time. A low growl it was, which befitted the manner in which the animal crouched. It was ready to spring.

At the signal from the woman, it did.

It was a fluid motion, accompanied by an open-jawed kill-cry. The Count's move also was fluid, his right hand deftly and seemingly effortlessly plucking the hurdling beast from midair, grasping the creature just below the lower jaw and continuing the horizontal arc of the arm flow until the top of the animal's head cracked into the jagged wall to the left of Dracula. Without bothering to glance at the staved-in skull of the beast, the Count released his grip, the wolf's body falling on top of an open chest of gold, its blood and brain-matter mixing with rings and bracelets and other jeweled trinkets.

"No one ever has done that," the woman said. There was a mixture of fear and admiration in her tone, with neither obviously dominant. "You—you above all men I have known—you I wish for my consort."

The Count again bowed. "Your consort?" His laugh was a mocking rumble. "Your consort?"

"You—you said that I interested you."

"And you did—*somewhat*, as I also said."

"*Look* upon me, Count Dracula! Look upon my body, but see also into my mind. I am not unlovely, am I? And my brain and my soul are such as to make me a worthy companion to one such as yourself. Let me prove myself to—"

"Prove yourself? Woman, you are as nothing in my eyes! A flesh-covered skeleton, a face and figure from which youth and most of what is life already has faded! A worthy companion to such as myself! There—there

where the body of the young man lies, is where rests the one of whom you are worthy. For he is dead, as much of you already is—and as the remainder of you soon shall be.”

“Don’t—*don’t come near me!*”

An amused smile. “Myself come to you? No, woman, you are correct in that. You shall come to me—*won’t you?*”

“I—”

She was going to say to him—what? She could not recall. His eyes. . . . But no! She could not go to him, *would* not! She did not have to, she still had control over her own movements, didn’t she? Of course she did! He would have to—

His face! It had been a face which had pleased her, but now—

It was changing . . . as was his voice:

“You wished to prove your charms to me? Come, then.”

No! Not to him, not to *that!* No-no-no-no! To die was one thing, but to walk willingly to that death was another. She would not—

“*No!*”

“Your last kiss awaits you, Dava. Come here and collect it.”

A kiss? Was he then joking about killing her? Had she won his interest after all?

“Yes, Master,” she said, her left foot moving through golden coins.

“That is better, Dava. I await you. I wish to thank you for the idea you gave to me.”

Right foot now went ahead of left. “Idea, Master?”

“The guard for my door. Milhail. You remember mentioning that?”

His teeth, so sharp. The red eyes with the golden centers.

"I remember, Master." A step closer now.

"Thus shall you serve me as well, Dava. You also will guard my treasure room. Do you accept the task willingly?"

No! God, what am I doing? I'm walking to him! I'm *willingly*—

"Yes, Master, I accept it willingly."

Who is saying these words? Who is using my brain and tongue to seal my doom? *Another step!* I must stop, I must!

His mouth. It opens to speak again, but I do not want to hear more—I do not. I want to scream, but I cannot! Kill me, kill me—but *do not speak more!*

"But there will be a difference between my two guards, Dava. Do you want to hear what that difference will be?"

No-no-no-no-no!

"Of course, Master."

"Then I shall tell you. One of my guards—yourself—will not be dead when the golden nails are driven through the limbs. Almost dead, perhaps, because my thirst must be quenched. But I shall leave just enough life within you so that you will know to the full the curse you have brought upon yourself for heeding not my golden warning!"

His voice softened. "Think on this, Dava, and tell me—does the prospect I offer please you?"

Oh, please no—no! He is just inches from me now!

"Yes, Master."

Dracula's eyebrows raised as he bent his face forward and downward. "Then why, Dava—why is it you are screaming?"

"I'm not—"

But her screams cut off her denial. They were brain-

racking screams, their origins deep within that small place below the pit of the stomach where it is said terror originates. They were inhumanly loud, those screams.

And they continued for a very long time.

CHAPTER 15

There were still two hours to go before the breaking of dawn. Outside their hostel in Pitesti, all was ready. The baggage of the visitors from America had all been loaded into the panel truck, including the heavy crate, the top of which had been nailed tightly shut. The official limousine was parked beside it, and the passengers were about to take their seats. As Cam prepared to assist Harmon from his wheelchair and into the car, the professor gestured with the palm of his hand for him to wait a moment. He was looking at Thorka, who in turn was looking wistfully toward Dracula Mountain.

"I think it looks as if it might snow," the Romanian said.

Ktara, who again insisted that she would ride in the truck with the baggage, smiled. "It is perhaps well. A blanket of white snow will make the village appear fresh and clean. Arefu and the mountain perhaps need a change in aura."

Thorka nodded slowly. "It is a real pity. That I should not have seen . . . what there was to see." He sighed. "But that cannot be helped now, I suppose. Yet, I think I would have given one of my old eyes—even my left one which is somewhat superior to my right—to have witnessed . . ."

The old man shook his head. "After the past day,

Damien, I am not certain whether what I feel is true despondency or merely physical exhaustion. Come, let us make our drive back to Bucharest, during which I shall endeavor to make you change your mind about remaining there with me for several days."

The car doors opened. After helping Harmon into the rear seat and placing his collapsible wheelchair in the trunk of the car, Cam took his place beside the driver. Thorka meanwhile had climbed in next to Harmon, who was explaining that any thought of an extended stay in Romania would have to be postponed.

"Until our next visit, if there is one. We have telephoned for our plane to be ready and also have arranged for our Atlantic passage. There really is no possible way we can avoid leaving, Alex, although we certainly appreciate your invitation."

"So soon, Damien. One day you arrive, then must go so soon. Ah! I believe I *am* becoming despondent. One has so few remaining old friends when one reaches my advanced age. Of course I recognize your reasons for your hasty departure. I could *prove* nothing, as you know full well. I, after all, was not there to see. And those who *were* there—well, they hardly could be called objective witnesses. The authorities in Bucharest, if not those in Pitesti, would view their statements as sheer superstitious nonsense. But me, I would have given the world—"

"The world, Doctor?"

Ktara had been standing by his side of the car. "The world? First it was your best eye, and now you offer everything. But neither offer is necessary."

Harmon and Cam exchanged a rapid glance, then returned their attention to the woman. It was the professor who asked the question. Warily: "How do you mean that?"

Ktara's voice was level, with no trace of emotion. "In

a month's time, Dr. Thorka, I suggest you take a day off from your duties and come back to this place. More specifically, to Arefu—and to the studio of Orgo."

Thorka rubbed his beard. "The sculptor? Why do you—"

"More than this I have no time to say. As Professor Harmon has mentioned, we have an aircraft awaiting us." And with that she was gone, standing beside the cab of the truck. The driver, having started the motor, looked impatient for her to enter, but she did not do so immediately. Her eyes were directed toward Arefu.

The motor of the limousine also was turned into action. A simple thing to understand, the turning of an automobile engine. Which is why the face of the driver appeared completely untroubled. Not so the faces of his three passengers.

"Orgo," Thorka said speculatively. "If I remember correctly, he was not even on that mountain last night. How could he possibly—"

Cam interrupted. "Excuse me, Doctor, but our friend Ktara sometimes enjoys being cryptic."

Thorka said nothing, but his mind spoke a silent answer: Maybe so, young man, but in a month's time—in a month's time to the very day—I shall be in Arefu, paying a call at the studio of the sculptor Orgo.

The man who even then was uppermost in Thorka's thoughts stepped backward across the floor of the small one-room shack which was his combination studio-living quarters. They were not ideal quarters, but even so he could get almost the perspective he needed by pressing his back into the far wall as far as it would go, almost straining the very fabric of the structure.

As he did so, he cared not at all about the pressure against his shoulders. His eyes remained focused where

they had been—on the nine-foot-high stone on the other side of the room.

He had worked—how many hours? How much sweat had his body lost, how much fatigue had it carried? He had no sense of time this night. Since leaving the inn, since getting the mental picture—in a flash of what artists of all ilks deem to be inspiration—he had worked steadily with hammer and chisel. But the rock, though of excellent quality, was hard to the edge, difficult to work.

Or was it himself who was being difficult?

Always he had demanded perfection from himself, but this time . . .

It was as if someone—or something—else were using his powerful arms and hands to express a truth. . . .

A truth. That was what he'd always wanted to carve upon the firmness of stone. His present subject matter was one which he long had considered "telling." A teller of tales in stone. And the tale was one for which Arefu offered the perfect site. Yet, it had eluded him. He had walked the mountain by day, stepped within the stones of the ruined castle, but he had not, could not—

Not until this evening when, all of a sudden, it had come.

In sharp clarity, in masses and angles, almost in pre-planned chisel positions, it had come.

And now, as he had several times already this night, he stepped from his work to view it critically.

All these hours and only the head and part of the left shoulder were complete. No, not complete. There was something about the face.

Something wrong.

He'd sensed it hours ago when, from the streets outside, he had heard a shouting. What could all those people have been shouting about? That was a question he'd considered only briefly. They had their concerns, he had

his. And then, as now, his concern was that he had done something wrong.

The face.

It was that of a man, but not quite a man. Something bestial, yes. But too bestial. The quality he was looking for—that he felt he was being guided to look for—was more. . . .

More *what?*

More human? No.

More . . . *more than human?*

Yes.

A beast which is more than human?

Yes.

But no. This—man?—was a killer, a fiend. A vampire. And that is how his face was, that of a bloodsucking beast. What more was there? Was there anything more to say in this stone carving? Assuredly not.

Yes.

"What, then?" he shouted aloud.

The eyes? No. He somehow knew they were perfect as he had them.

The mouth? No, he had the huge, extended teeth which . . .

The mouth.

It *was* the mouth.

The corners. Make them show a sad amusement, an amused sadness.

Orgo's head snapped to his right, then his left.

"Who said that?"

Said? Who was here to say anything? There was just himself and his piece of rock, the mouth of which—

Yes. He knew now how he could get the effect which would satisfy him.

What he did not know was that in Pitesti a woman climbed into a panel truck, smiling to herself with a smile

that he might have interpreted as sad amusement—or amused sadness. Whatever the full content of her thoughts at that moment, part of her feeling was for the sculptor who even now was continuing his labor. Perhaps she knew other things that he did not.

Namely, that his work, *The Vampire Count*, would be a masterpiece, as testified to by Alexandru Thorka himself.

Namely, that the masterpiece would be viewed with such horror by all who saw it that it would meet with refusals everywhere its creator attempted to show it.

Namely, that within the current calendar year, Orgo the sculptor would climb the mountain of Dracula, there to leave his creation. He would go on to produce major works and win a measure of fame which he did not seek, but his mind often would go back to Arefu and the mountain above it—and to his first masterpiece which, as chance would have it, would stand as a weathered sentinel directly above two other sentinels—

One of whom was a woman who had died screaming.

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